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**THRU-HIKING AS PILGRIMAGE:
TRANSFORMATION, NATURE, AND RELIGION
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN HIKING NOVELS**

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Abstract

Thru-hiking is a phenomenon in which one walks long distances—sometimes 2,000 miles or longer—on journeys often spanning continents and lasting many months at a time. In this work, I ask whether thru-hiking can be considered a form of pilgrimage and what implications doing so might have in the study of religion and nature.

Using three popular hiking memoirs, I argue that thru-hiking is a form of pilgrimage because it emphasizes themes of transformation, community, and space. In doing so, I also find evidence for religious practice spanning beyond organized religion, pointing towards more diffuse and individualized forms of spirituality common to the United States. Secondly, I situate contemporary thru-hiking novels within a larger tradition of American nature writing, tracing distinct values around nature, the self, and society. Finally, I demonstrate the ways in which new media and technology influence the experience of long-distance walking.

As an activity that permeates popular media, thru-hiking not only serves as an important example of how values are reflected to society at large, but also of how depictions shape the values of those who consume it. This investigation seeks to bring this forward, in addition to analyzing the religious dimension of thru-hiking.

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INTRODUCTION

The act of thru-hiking is a phenomenon in which one walks long distances—sometimes 2,000 miles or longer—on journeys often spanning continents and lasting many months at a time. Like religious practices around walking, namely pilgrimage, thru-hiking is a major undertaking in one's life. The question must be asked if these two phenomena are distinct from one other, united only in the act of walking, or if they are in fact related on a more sophisticated level.

Furthermore, thru-hiking enters the media through books, films, and blogs, showcasing the event to the world. That is, it is not contained to the act itself, but is represented and depicted to audiences far away. In considering thru-hiking as a form of pilgrimage, then, the role of media becomes a lens by which one can study into the act. As an entry point into the study of thru-hiking as pilgrimage, I have chosen to look at media surrounding thru-hiking including books, films, blogs, and other internet resources. Specifically, I look at three popular books, *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson, *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, and *A Sense of Direction* by Gideon Lewis-Kraus to gain insight into thru-hiking experience, including motivations and values of the authors. I also chose these books as representations of popular memoirs so that I could unpack the influences of their depictions. This genre is particularly timely given its presence in mainstream media and its rise in popularity over the last few decades. It is with this in mind that I chose to look at media at all, as it allows for insights in the act of thru-hiking itself in addition to the way these journeys are understood and represented to the public.

What brought me to this project is a broad interest in the relationship between humans and their natural environment. As a student of both Religious Studies and Ecology & Evolutionary Biology, I have had the opportunity to explore this question through two different academic traditions. However, like the division between secular and religious pilgrimage, the divisions between

Religious Studies and Biology are not always clearly defined; it is in these areas that I have always found the most joy. Furthermore, as a backpacker myself, my interest in thru-hiking as pilgrimage is a personal one. Though I see this work as a culmination of my academic studies, more importantly, it engages my concerns beyond the academy.

This work spans three chapters in which I examine the act of thru-hiking and its representations through the media. In the first, I argue that thru-hiking is a form of pilgrimage because it emphasizes themes of transformation, community, and space. In the following chapter, I argue that in emphasizing themes of nature and self-reliance, modern thru-hiking books continue within a broader American literary and spiritual tradition characteristic of Transcendentalism. In the final chapter, I examine the way media is used in relationship to thru-hiking and argue that the pilgrimage experience changes with new media in an effort to conceive more broadly of the influences of media on modern pilgrimage.

What this study of thru-hiking as pilgrimage offers to the academic study of religion is a broader perspective to the act of pilgrimage and an example of how popular media can be used to navigate religious experiences. First, it challenges conceptions of what pilgrimage is and what it does for the pilgrim. It also provides examples of religious practice spanning beyond organized religion, pointing towards more diffuse and individualized forms of spirituality common to the United States. Secondly, in using media to guide my work, I come to the subject of thru-hiking and pilgrimage from a perspective that is uncommon to their study at this time. For the field of religion, this means engaging in a method of study that has the potential to offer new insights into a topic that has been discussed for a long time.

Throughout the following three chapters, I use themes from three popular books to support the claim that thru-hiking is a form of pilgrimage. Before engaging in that discussion, however, I introduce the three popular books I will be referencing throughout my thesis.

***A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson**

A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail is a book written in 1998 by writer and journalist Bill Bryson. Born in Des Moines, Iowa, Bryson attended university for two years there before dropping out and traveling instead. A decade later, he began writing about his travels and other non-fiction topics. He's been awarded with honors such as an honorary doctorate from King's College London and the James Joyce Award. *A Walk in the Woods* is one of Bryson's most famous works, making the New York Times Best Seller list in 1998. Many of Bryson's other books, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir* and *One Summer: America, 1927*, for example, reflect heavily on the American experience, drawing upon historical facts to tell a story.

A Walk in the Woods is one such book. It is a biographical account of Bryson's experience thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail in 1997 with an old high school friend named Stephen Katz. Aside from outlining his walk, Bryson discusses the history of the trail, the history of the U.S., and his thoughts on nature, preservation, and America. In his discussions of America, Bryson muses on ideas of capitalism and progress.

The book begins with Bryson getting in touch with Katz, a recovering alcoholic. The two begin a northbound hike on the Appalachian Trail, though Bryson is not particularly fond of Katz as a companion; in fact, he kind of hates him, but he is afraid of going alone. The men hike together, though usually with Bryson a few hours ahead of Katz, as their paces are different. They camp together in the evenings and have brief encounters with other hikers on the trail and stop in towns

along the way. The men decide however to take a hiatus from the hike after 500 miles, after skipping several segments of the trail. After several months at home, Bryson returns to the trail alone, this time using a car to access the trail in manageable segments. He took yet another break before returning to the trail with Katz in Maine to do the final and most difficult stretch of the AT. They lose each other during this segment and upon reuniting decide to quit. They do not make it to Mt. Katahdin, the end of the Appalachian Trail and instead return to their own respective lives and homes. Bryson ends the book writing, “We didn’t walk 2,200 miles, it’s true, but here’s the thing: we tried... and I don’t care what anybody says. We hiked the Appalachian Trail.”¹

A Walk in the Woods was adapted into a film starring Robert Redford, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2015. The film was announced in 2005, but production was delayed during the Hollywood Writers’ Strike. The film has received average ratings from critics. Currently, plans for distribution are unknown.

***Wild* by Cheryl Strayed**

Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail is a book by Cheryl Strayed written about her experience hiking the Pacific Crest Trail in 1995. It was written nearly a decade after the fact and published in 2012. *Wild* is a New York Times Bestseller, an Amazon Bestseller, and a selection of Oprah’s Book Club. Before *Wild*, Strayed wrote a book titled *Torch* and wrote for a popular advice column called “Dear Sugar.” Her other works are known to be largely based on her life.

Cheryl Strayed was born in Pennsylvania to her mother and abusive father, who became divorced when Strayed was six years old. She was raised by her mother, who passed away at 45 years old from lung cancer. Her mother’s death had a profound influence on Strayed and is discussed in

¹ Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 274.

most of her writing. Strayed studied English and Women's Studies and spent her younger years working as a waitress; she is now an author.

While *Wild* follows a nonlinear plotline, it is a clear account of Strayed's experience hiking the PCT and the events leading up to it. After her mother's death, Strayed, who was married at the time, began cheating on her husband. The two divorced after a few years and several affairs later, upon which she changed her last name to "Strayed." She moved to Portland, where her life continued to take a downward spiral as she dates a drug addict, begins using heroin, and has an abortion. It is shortly after that she commits to hiking the Pacific Crest Trail.

At the start of her hike, which begins in Southern California, Strayed struggles to adjust to life on the trail--she had never backpacked before. After a few days, she meets a man and stays at his house for the night, accepting dinner and a shower from him and his wife. Afterwards, Strayed continues, meeting other hikers along the way, including one who helps her lighten her pack. Due to snow in the High Sierras, Strayed bypasses a segment of the trail and spends a few days in Reno with a fellow hiker instead. She continues on the PCT, making brief acquaintances along the route. Upon reaching Ashland, Oregon, Strayed meets a man with whom she has a brief romantic encounter. She continues hiking, however, finally making it to the Bridge of the Gods in Oregon/Washington, which marks the end of her hike. There, she meets a man who offers to drive her to Portland. She refuses, but reveals that she will have later ended up marrying that man and having children with him. In the final passage of the book, while not knowing what awaits her, Strayed writes "How wild it was, to let it be."² In all, her hike was 1,100 miles long, only a portion of the entire PCT, 2,650 miles.

On her personal website, Strayed explains her process in writing *Wild* years later. She writes:

² Cheryl Strayed, *Wild* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 311.

I kept a journal all through my 20s and 30s, and yes, I kept a journal on my PCT hike, which I noted passingly in *WILD*. My journal was enormously helpful to me as I wrote the book, often providing me with details I'd have forgotten. I also researched facts and consulted others about their recollection and interpretation of some of the events I wrote about in *WILD*, but, like any memoir, *WILD* is based primarily on memory crafted with the intention of creating a piece of literature, not a report. I re-conjured moments, recreated conversations, feelings, landscapes, and the people I met as I remembered them from my own point of view and my own subjective memory.³

Rather than *Wild* being an entirely factual account, it is story crafted by Strayed after the fact.

Since publishing *Wild*, Strayed has been deeply involved with the film adaptation of her book starring Reese Witherspoon, which premiered at the Telluride Film Festival in August 2014. It was released in major movie theaters in December 2014 and made \$37.5 million in box office sales. The film was nominated for two Academy Awards and received favorable reviews by the popular site *Rotten Tomatoes*.

***A Sense of Direction* by Gideon Lewis-Kraus**

A Sense of Direction: Pilgrimage for the Restless and the Hopeful is the first book by Gideon Lewis-Kraus, published in 2012. Lewis-Kraus is a Stanford graduate, Fulbright Fellow, and current contributor to *New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's* magazine, and *WIRED* magazine.

A Sense of Direction is Lewis-Kraus' memoir, the focus of which is on his personal search for meaning. As a 27-year-old Jewish man living in San Francisco, Lewis-Kraus was growing dissatisfied with his life with a long-term girlfriend. He is the son of two rabbis, though Lewis-Kraus himself identifies as being "culturally Jewish." Upon receiving a Fulbright Fellowship to research Jewish culture in Berlin, he moves there, hoping to live an avant-garde, free lifestyle he believed would fulfill him. Lewis-Kraus constantly tries to make peace with a part of himself that becomes more and

³ Cheryl Strayed, "Frequently Asked Questions." (Accessed March 26, 2015. <http://www.cherylstrayed.com/bio.htm>.)

more difficult to ignore; pain over his homosexual father, who was absent for much of Lewis-Kraus' life. When Berlin turns out to be unsatisfying, Lewis-Kraus and his friend Tom decide to leave for El Camino de Compostela, an ancient Catholic pilgrimage route across France and Spain. Lewis-Kraus hopes that he will find a sense of purpose and finally be cured of his ever-present restlessness.

Tom and Lewis-Kraus walk the Camino for about a month, growing increasingly annoyed with one another. Though the pair endure the physical hardship involved with completing the Camino, Lewis-Kraus tirelessly tries to sort through his inner turmoil--realizations of his commitment issues, anger towards his father, and general anxiety over the number of choices life offers. They reach the Compostela de Santiago together, but Lewis-Kraus still feels lost and unsure of what to do with himself. He decides to do another pilgrimage route, the Shikoku, a 750-mile walk around the Japanese island of Shikoku, visiting 88 temples along the way.

After a brief stint in Berlin and Shanghai--where he meets a woman he takes interest in possibly dating--Lewis-Kraus arrives in Japan and begins his pilgrimage. He has high hopes for the experience of doing the Shikoku alone. Despite spending the first week with his grandfather, he persists in his desire to walk by himself. He is not particularly impressed by the scenery along the Shikoku and fantasizes about the Camino, still contemplating heavily his personal issues. He makes some friends along the way, but upon completing the route, remains unsure of what he should be doing. He returns to San Francisco, deciding to go on yet another pilgrimage. This time, however, he needs to go with his father--the man he holds much animosity towards. They agree to undertake a Hasid pilgrimage to the Ukrainian village of Uman, the site of a pogrom, in celebration of Rosh Hashanah along with Lewis-Kraus' brother. The three men depart.

The walk to Uman, Lewis-Kraus notes, is more like the traditional pilgrimage he had been anticipating. There are clear rules and restrictions, a large community united by their Jewish faith,

and a long-standing history. Aside from feeling a connection to his heritage, however, Lewis-Kraus is moved by the experience of confronting his father about the pain he has been harboring. The two engage in conversations about the past. Lewis-Kraus is at first unsatisfied, hearing that his father has few regrets about the way he has lived his life. However, as the book comes to an end, Lewis-Kraus reaches a state of sympathy and forgiveness for his father, realizing there was little use in holding onto negative feelings any longer. At the end of their walk to Uman, Lewis-Kraus, his brother, and his father all go their separate ways to their homes around the world. Shortly afterwards, on Yom Kippur, Lewis-Kraus writes to his father expressing his feelings of forgiveness. The book ends with his father's response, in which he writes, "I hope that my flaws which have caused you pain are lessened, and that you will forgive me for all the things I have done wrong... Love, Dad."⁴

TV rights for *A Sense of Direction* have been optioned by Red Hour Productions, though there is no official information about what the company will produce. Though it is not as popular as *Wild* or *A Walk in the Woods*, it has been reviewed by *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian*, *The Boston Globe* and *Publisher's Weekly*.

⁴ Gideon Lewis-Kraus, *A Sense of Direction* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 369.

CHAPTER 1: THRU-HIKING AS PILGRIMAGE

Thru-hiking

“Thru-hiking” is a term used to describe the act of completing a long-distance footpath in a single attempt, while a “thru-hike” describes the path itself. There is no clearly-defined criteria of what constitutes a thru-hike, though it is generally understood to be a path over 100 miles in length, taking at least a few weeks to complete. Given that thru-hikes take so long, they require sleeping accommodations along the way, either in the form of camping (a sport called backpacking), shelters, hostels, hotels, churches, the homes of people along the way, or a combination. Commonly, American trails like the Appalachian, Pacific Crest, Continental Divide, John Muir, and Colorado Trails are considered thru-hikes, provided that they are completed from end-to-end. Examples of international thru-hikes are the Way of St. James (Camino de Santiago), Shikoku, Great Divide Trail, Te Araroa Trail, Israel National Trail, and Great Himalaya Trail.

There are many ways one can engage with a trail, which generates a lot of terms to describe them. One who spends the night on the trail is called a *backpacker*, as this sport usually requires carrying all necessary gear (sleeping bag, food, water, etc). *Purists* hike every step of the official trail, passing every trail marker that exists. Purists are typically understood to do traditional backpacking the entire way, though resupplying in towns is allowed. *Day hikers* spend one day on the trail; *overnight hikers* spend more than one day on the trail; *section hikers* complete trail segments, usually with the hopes of eventually completing the entirety of the trail; and *thru-hikers* complete the entire trail, beginning to end, in a single attempt. There is also much slang revolving around the ways one completes a trail. *Slackpackers* hike with no backpack, usually driving on and off the trail daily or receiving substantial help from a loved one; *yellow-blazing* is the act of hitchhiking or driving for parts

of the trail; *rainbow blazers* connect multiple different routes during their expedition, including different destinations.⁵ The terms “thru-hiker” and “backpacker” often go hand in hand, as I will describe in later sections.

HYOH

Despite all the lingo that exists to describe ways of hiking, still no perfectly clear interpretation exists for what “correct” thru-hiking is. Backpackers and thru-hikers commonly consider themselves as such even if they undertake trips in which they do not always sleep outdoors, carry equipment, complete all parts of the trail, or travel only by foot. It is not uncommon for hikers to skip segments or hitchhike during parts of their trip, for example. Thus, within the backpacking community itself, much discussion is had over what it means to be an authentic thru-hiker.

In one discussion over the question, Facebook users chime in on what it means to be an authentic thru-hiker.⁶ While some hold the idea that a correct thru-hike requires faithfulness to walking the entire trail by foot, many have a more sympathetic approach. The acronym HYOH—“Hike your own hike”—is used often within the thru-hiking community as an encouragement to deviate from the purist perspective. What seems to matter to most is the experience one takes away, regardless of the logistical details of the hike. For example, one comment says

In my opinion, anyone who hikes a good distance of the AT is an AT Hiker. Some section hikers are so careful not to call themselves thru-hiker if they split their trek into a few years because there are militant purists out there who may call them on it. Not me! Having experienced the trail, I have respect for anyone that does any number of miles. HYOH!!!⁷

⁵ Rick Bolger, “The Slackpacker’s Lexicon,” <http://www.slackpacker.com/lexicon.html> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

⁶ Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/Thruhike/posts/112021445487715> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

⁷ User Dave ‘Dah Wah-He’ Foley, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/Thruhike/posts/112021445487715> (Accessed March 26, 2015.).

Here, anyone who gives a decent attempt on the trail earns the distinction of “thru-hiker.” This opinion is reminiscent of Bill Bryson’s final lines of *A Walk in the Woods* in which, upon quitting the hike, he says “We didn’t walk 2,200 miles, it’s true, but here’s the thing: we tried. ...I don’t care what anybody says. We hiked the Appalachian Trail.”⁸ For some, thru-hiking is about the effort and not the outcome.

Another user responds with another common opinion: that it is the individual experience that defines the hike. He writes, “if you can be happy with yourself for what you have completed, then that’s all that matters.”⁹ This reflects a tone of indifference towards the “correct” way to hike which can be found all over trail forums. Many even claim that experiences off the main trail were more meaningful to them than the experiences that they had on it. What counts, ultimately, is that the participant enjoys their experience. “HYOH,” is the consensus.

To get recognition for a thru-hike by Pacific Crest Trail Association or the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, one needs no formal proof of the undertaking.¹⁰ Thus, even on a formal level, there is an acceptance towards variation in the way a thru-hike is done. Books like *A Walk in the Woods* gain popularity despite the fact that the trail was left incomplete. It seems as though there is an understanding that meaning goes beyond mileage.

⁸ Bryson, 274.

⁹ User Chris Darby, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/Thruhike/posts/112021445487715> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

¹⁰ Pacific Crest Trail Association, "Completion Medals and Certificates," <http://www.pcta.org/discover-the-trail/long-distance-hiking/completion-medals-and-certificates/> (Accessed March 26, 2015). Appalachian Trail Conservancy, "Appalachian Trail Conservancy - 2000 Miler Application," <https://www.appalachiantrail.org/about-the-trail/2000-milers/2000-miler-application> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

The Appalachian Trail

The Appalachian Trail, called the AT for short, is a 2,180 mile trail spanning from Georgia to Maine. It was completed in 1937 following the 1921 proposal of Benton MacKaye.¹¹ Today, it is maintained by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), a non-profit organization whose vision statement reads as follows:

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy's vision is to connect the human spirit with nature – preserving the delicate majesty of the Trail as a haven for all to enjoy.

We are committed to nurture and protect this sacred space through education and inspiration. We strive to create an ever-expanding community of doers and dreamers, and work to ensure that tomorrow's generations will experience the same mesmerizing beauty we behold today.¹²

This statement is riddled with religious language, regarding the trail as a “sacred space” or as having the ability “to connect the human spirit with nature.” Indeed, as will be explored in further sections, the AT plays a special role in the transformation of those who use it. Every year, around 800 AT hikers become “2000 milers,” folks who have completed the entire length of the trail. This number gets bigger nearly every year, although a consistent 25% of those who begin will finish.¹³

It is also clear that media play an important role in the AT's popularity. Upon the publication of *A Walk in the Woods* in 1998, the number of thru-hikers on the AT increased by 60%. For the 2015 season, following the film release of *A Walk in the Woods* and the book and film *Wild*, large numbers of hikers are anticipated. In fact, for the first time ever, in 2015, the ATC has created a

¹¹ For more information on MacKaye's vision of the Appalachian Trail, which urged for a trail, shelter system, community around the trail, and food and farm camps, see: Benton MacKaye, “An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning”. (*Journal of the American Institute of Architects* 9 Oct. 1921): 325-330.

¹² Appalachian Trail Conservancy, "Our Mission, Vision & Values," <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/who-we-are/our-mission-vision-values> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

¹³ Appalachian Trail Conservancy, "2000 Milers," <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/about-the-trail/2000-milers> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

voluntary thru-hike registration system to prevent overcrowding. This is an effort to disperse hikers and preserve “the traditional natural AT experience.”¹⁴

The Pacific Crest Trail

The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) is a 2,650 mile trail spanning from southern California to Washington. It was first proposed in 1926 and designated as a National Scenic Trail by 1968. It is maintained by the Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA), a non-profit organization.

Significantly fewer thru-hikers attempt and complete the PCT compared to the AT. Every year, nearly 800 hikers attempt the trail, while about 500 successfully finish. To date, 3,423 have thru-hiked the trail.¹⁵ Like the AT, however, the Pacific Crest Trail is anticipating an increase in hikers following the popularity of *Wild*. It too has employed a new permit system limiting trail use. Since the film, website traffic has increased by 300% and hiking attempts by 30%.¹⁶ Author Cheryl Strayed has teamed up with the PCTA to endorse the organization and trail stewardship initiatives, a campaign including a feature for hikers to submit their PCT stories for the public to see. The campaign has sponsorship from companies like REI, Gregory, and Leki, who give prizes to those who promote the PCTA and *Wild* on social media platforms. Additionally, they have adopted the hashtag #responsiblyWILD as way to gain support for the trail and to endorse ethical backpacking practices.¹⁷

¹⁴ Karen Chavez, "Appalachian Trail Popularity Spurs Registry," *Citizen Times*, <http://www.citizen-times.com/story/sports/outdoors/2015/02/18/appalachian-trail-popularity-spurs-registry/23618543> (Accessed March 25, 2015).

¹⁵ Pacific Crest Trail Association, "2,600 Miler List," <http://www.pcta.org/discover-the-trail/long-distance-hiking/2600-miler-list> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

¹⁶ "The 'Wild' Effect: Pacific Crest Trail Expects More Hikers Thanks to Movie," *NY Daily News*. (Accessed March 26, 2015).

¹⁷ Pacific Crest Trail Association, "WILD Movie and Book - Cheryl Strayed and Reese Witherspoon - Pacific Crest Trail Association," <http://www.pcta.org/wild/> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

Thru-Hiking and Religion

What might be religious about thru-hiking? For one, the act is reminiscent of traditional pilgrimages in which one walks a route as a part of religious practice. Upon a closer look, it seems that many of the characteristics that define pilgrimage are present in thru-hiking: transformative experiences, community, and well-defined routes. This puts thru-hikes, at least some thru-hikes, into the category of “secular pilgrimage,” a pilgrimage devoid of religious tradition, which I will discuss in the following sections. In this section, I look at pilgrimage and secular pilgrimage to contextualize the way these ideas are conceived of in the academic study of religion. Then, I will look at thru-hiking specifically as it relates to these conceptions.

Pilgrimage

The act of pilgrimage has been a part of religious practices for thousands of years. Despite its prevalence throughout history and throughout different traditions, the idea of pilgrimage itself continues to be negotiated within the academic study of religion. Based on conversations around the idea of “secular pilgrimage”—secular acts that resemble pilgrimage—the definition of pilgrimage is encompassing more and more acts. The definition of pilgrimage I will be working with allows room for broad conceptions of pilgrimage, yet maintains some distinction between pilgrimage and long-distance travel, sport, or tourism. Peter Margry defines pilgrimage as

“[a] journey based on religious or spiritual inspiration, undertaken by individuals or groups, to a place that is regarded as more sacred than the environment of everyday life, to seek a transcendental encounter with a specific cult object for the purpose of acquiring spiritual, emotional, or physical healing or benefit.”¹⁸

¹⁸ P.J. Margry, *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World New Itineraries into the Sacred* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008).

Thus, according to Margry, pilgrimage requires (1) religious or spiritual inspiration, (2) a sacred place, and (3) an encounter with a sacred object which may provide spiritual, emotional, or physical healing. It is mostly under this model that I will discuss thru-hiking as pilgrimage.

One of the most famous works on pilgrimage is *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* by Victor and Edith Turner.¹⁹ Using an anthropological approach to religion, Turner and Turner describe pilgrimage as a rite of passage in which the pilgrim disassociates from stable social relationships, enters a period of liminality, and then returns to regular life under a new personal framework. This process is rich, offering a well-accepted theory of pilgrimage within the academic study of religion.

To understand Turner and Turner, it is important to understand Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage, on which the Turners drew heavily for their work on pilgrimage. Van Gennep described rites of passage as an entrance into new territory; a "magico-religious aspect of crossing frontiers."²⁰ This transition can be conceived of in three parts, "rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage, *liminal (or threshold) rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world, *post-liminal rites*."²¹ Victor Turner summarized these stages as follows:

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject ("the passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type; he is

¹⁹ Victor W. Turner and Edith L. B. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

²⁰ Arnold Van Gennep, Monika Vizedom, and Gabrielle Caffee, "The Territorial Passage." In *The Rites of Passage*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 15.

²¹ Van Gennep, 20.

expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.²²

Thus Turner summarizes a rite of passage as a phase of separation from an earlier social structure, a phase of liminality or ambiguous state, and finally, a phase of returning to a social structure. Turner goes on to describe the idea of liminality more fully as an anti-structure or a phase in which normal rules, organization, rank, and distinctions do not apply. For Turner, the journey of pilgrimage is in the liminal stage of a rite of passage, while departure and return are in the preliminal and post-liminal stages, respectively.

During the state of liminality, social distinctions cease to exist, creating a camaraderie between those undertaking the ritual. For this idea, Turner introduces the term “communitas” as a “generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties.”²³ Communitas is an essential and generic human bond experienced between those in the state of liminality together.

Turner and Turner’s conceptions of pilgrimage as rites of passage can also be applied to thru-hiking. Although I do not focus on this explicitly, I will later draw out themes from popular books which signal elements defining Turner and Turner’s views of pilgrimage.

Secular Pilgrimage

In this section, it is my aim to introduce the idea of secular pilgrimage and thru-hiking. I will first unpack the term “secular pilgrimage” as it is understood in the academic literature. Then, I will begin to argue for why thru-hiking can qualify as pilgrimage.

²² Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine Pub., 1969), 94.

²³ Turner, 96.

To begin a discussion of secular pilgrimage is problematic straight away. One scholar of religion explains why:

...in recent decades, the question of what the term pilgrimage means exactly and what should be regarded as the criteria for a pilgrimage has only become more complicated. This applies even more strongly to what is referred to as 'secular pilgrimage'--a term consisting of two concepts which are troublesome to define and difficult to unite.²⁴

This statement reflects the difficult and glaring question of understanding what pilgrimage even is, what it is not, and where the boundaries are. When one refers to the term "secular pilgrimage," they are discussing a non-religious phenomenon that parallels a religious phenomenon; an act that resembles pilgrimage, yet lacks any clear sanctioning by church authority or religious tradition.

To get a sense for what types of acts are called "secular pilgrimage" by scholars of religion, consider the following example. One pilgrimage event, called Run for the Wall ("The Run" for short), is a ten-day motorcycle ride across the United States. In this route, veterans ride from California to Washington DC, arriving at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at the end. The journey is an act of mourning for those lost in the war as well a recognition of those who have served. There is also a political element to this event in that it calls attention to claims of prisoners of war still in Vietnam. Several characteristics make this non-religious act parallel religious ones; for example, there is a sense of community, a pre-established route, encounters with shrine objects and sacred spaces, and a focus on healing. These elements certainly make The Run resemble pilgrimage. As explored by Jill Dubisch, "Motorcycles are seen by many who ride them as representing American values of freedom, self-reliance, and individualism. The sense of solidarity and brotherhood that exists among bikers also comes into play during the pilgrimage..."²⁵ She also highlights the personal element behind The Run, writing that "Healing...is an important and often emphasized goal ...Such healing is

²⁴ Margry, 20.

²⁵ Margry, 302.

multifaceted, with social, psychological, and spiritual dimensions.”²⁶ Thus, in examining this yearly event which has no explicit religious roots, we can understand how complicated this term “secular pilgrimage” really is. Regardless, it is functional in identifying and exploring this kind of activity. Other examples of secular pilgrimage might include the movement of fans to important cultural sites like Graceland or the grave of Jim Morrison. Visiting the site of Matthew Shepherd’s murder, Normandy Beaches, or Sedona, AZ may also qualify, for example.

As you might see, the differences between pilgrimage and tourism are poorly-defined. This remains a lively question in both the field of religious studies and tourism studies. However, most agree that it is the motivation of the pilgrim that ultimately offers this distinction. Despite how controversial the term “secular pilgrimage” is, I use it because I think it is helpful in describing acts that are not traditionally thought of in terms of pilgrimage. This offers a rich way to consider how an act like thru-hiking might function in the life of the individual as well as further challenge the ways pilgrimage is understood.

Thru-Hiking as Secular Pilgrimage

I will examine the act of thru-hiking as a form of secular pilgrimage. In order to do so, I must first demonstrate that what commonly characterizes pilgrimage also applies to thru-hiking journeys. If we define pilgrimage as “journey based on religious or spiritual inspiration, undertaken by individuals or groups, to a place that is regarded as more sacred than the environment of everyday life, to seek a transcendental encounter with a specific cult object for the purpose of acquiring spiritual, motional, or physical healing or benefit,” we can begin to consider thru-hikes as

²⁶ Margry, 319.

such.²⁷ I will also engage with Turner & Turner's elements of pilgrimage, as described previously. In this section I will look at thru-hiking with these perspectives, briefly observing its (1) religious, (2) communal, (3) spatial, and (4) liminal qualities.

Thru-hiking and Religion

Perhaps the most obvious area of inquiry uniting secular travel memoirs to the study of pilgrimage lies in examining how the narrators themselves confront religion. In all of the media I reviewed, the narrator does not identify him or herself as being religious—in fact, this is often the case in the genre. Nevertheless, these books are often rich in religious content, themes, and language. The question of religion still plays a central role in much of this media, indicating that it is important to the writers and thus important to the act of thru-hiking. I believe that this indicates a more individualistic form of religion among the authors. I begin by reviewing what is said in the academic literature about the religiosity of pilgrims. I then look at how thru-hiking authors confront the theme of religion and healing in their books. Finally, I will analyze the religious content and language in the books.

The numbers of individuals going on pilgrimage is on the rise, though modern pilgrims often do not identify as religious. According to scholar of religion Ian Reader, who studies modern pilgrimage in Japan, “Rather than implying some form of religious revival, contemporary pilgrimage growth may...be seen as evidence of an increasing turn away from religion as an organized entity.”²⁸ A similar trend can be seen in contemporary books. I believe that the connection between modern

²⁷ Margry, 20.

²⁸ Ian Reader, "Pilgrimage Growth in the Modern World: Meanings and Implications." *Religion* 37, no. 3 (2007): 210-29.

pilgrimage and religion is more nuanced, however, as organized religion is replaced with individual or “seeker” forms of religion.

In *A Sense of Direction*, author Gideon Lewis-Kraus clearly states that his motivations for undergoing pilgrimage are not religious, writing “I’m not doing this for any sort of spiritual reason, I do not believe in God or divine forgiveness...”²⁹ He does not abandon religious ideas altogether, however. When discussing his experience on the Way of St. James, he writes that “...even the secular ritual this has largely become retains some promise of forgiveness. These rituals of travel seem to retain their power even when they’re no longer about belief.”³⁰ The transformative and healing benefit of pilgrimage is acknowledged while the religious component is rejected. Nevertheless, as is common in this genre of literature, questions of religion, faith, and God are actively discussed throughout the book. An example of this theological inquiry is evident when the narrator writes, “The Camino is not about God forgiving us but about us forgiving God.”³¹ To claim that the author rejects religion might be accurate, but it is not complete. That is, these media offer a possibility for new ways of understanding religion and modern pilgrimage. It is also worthwhile to note an Amazon review in which the user writes “It seems that even as Lewis-Kraus, and all of us through him, craves meaning, direction, and purpose, he actively avoids it in his active avoidance of anything that might bring him closer to God.”³² This is a strange dichotomy that plays out in these three books, demonstrating simultaneous rejection of religion and embrace of religion’s ability to grapple with questions of meaning.

²⁹ Lewis-Kraus, 94.

³⁰ Lewis-Kraus, 132.

³¹ Lewis-Kraus, 86.

³² Amazon User David Withum. “Direction in the directionless.”

http://www.amazon.com/gp/review/RF4FUTVO7X2J9/ref=cm_cr_pr_viewpnt?ie=UTF8&ASIN=1594487251#RF4FUTVO7X2J9 (Accessed March 26, 2015).

Lewis-Kraus, in addition to grappling with the idea of religion, makes overt references to his process of healing. In talking to his walking partner on the Camino, he writes, "...the two of us are walking this trail right now, and both of us have some hope, however faint, that it'll bring us solace."³³ The entire book, in fact, is an account of Lewis-Kraus coming to terms with issues with his father. In an interview, he says "...to some extent, the story about my reconciliation with my dad was an attempt to use my own life as a case study for the sorts of changes that pilgrimage can effect."³⁴ For Lewis-Kraus, the act of thru-hiking was more about transformation than anything else. In this way, despite his lack of religiosity, walking was an act that he himself calls pilgrimage.

In *Wild*, author Cheryl Strayed expresses having never been raised in a religious tradition. Nevertheless, she actively grapples with questions of faith, writing "I was as searching as I was skeptical. I didn't know where to put my faith, or if there was such a place, or even what the word faith meant."³⁵ She shows some rejection towards God (rather than religion), calling him "a ruthless bitch."³⁶ Her narrative is threaded with spiritual encounters with wildlife, questions of forgiveness, and musings on the workings of the universe, even of the legitimacy of astrology at one point. The reception of her book by reviewers also acknowledges the spiritual dimension of her journey. *The Christian Science Monitor*, for example, notes that "Strayed's journey was at least as transcendent as it was turbulent."³⁷ Topics central to religion are central to Strayed as well, although her journey can hardly be categorized as such. Furthermore, it is received by readers as having a spiritual quality.

³³ Lewis-Kraus, 94.

³⁴ Interview: Gideon Lewis-Kraus on *A SENSE OF DIRECTION*. ONE AT PUSHKIN PRESS, 2014.

³⁵ Strayed, 134.

³⁶ Strayed, 23.

³⁷ Marjorie Kehe, "Cheryl Strayed Talks about 'Wild'," *The Christian Science Monitor*, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Books/chapter-and-verse/2012/0326/Cheryl-Strayed-talks-about-Wild> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

Strayed also places an incredible focus on her healing. Arguably, that is the entire point of her narrative; to recover from divorce, addiction, issues with her father, and most importantly, the death of her mother. Strayed writes:

I had to change. *I had to change* was the thought that drove me in those months of planning. Not into a different person, but back to the person I used to be--strong and responsible, clear-eyed and driven, ethical and good. And the PCT would make me that way. There, I'd walk and think about my entire life. I'd find my strength again, far from everything that had made my life ridiculous.³⁸

Strayed's thru-hike is motivated by a clear internal struggle. She seeks out the PCT as redemption from the chaos of her life, an act that will restore her to being who she wants to be, similar to what might motivate one to undergo pilgrimage. Thus, questions of religion and healing, central to this genre of literature, merit acts of thru-hiking to be categorized as something very much like pilgrimage.

Another striking observation of books in this genre is that they often resemble the arc of religious stories such as *Siddhartha* or *The Life of Milarepa*. That is, the flawed main character embarks on a long transformative journey to redeem themselves, meeting many people along the way that help them uncover their life's lesson. Movement is often central to these stories as the main character feels the urge to leave their homes for what is unknown. The same frame is common to modern secular thru-hiking literature, generally.

The prominent theme of religion and healing in modern thru-hiking books suggests that it is common for narrators to both grapple with and reject their religious identities while still relying on religious tropes and themes to carry their plot forward. I would not consider this genre of literature to parody religion, but rather to actually engage with questions that are fundamental to faith. That is to say that though thru-hiking is not typically considered a form of pilgrimage, it does not adequately

³⁸ Strayed, 57.

separate itself in terms of the motivations held by the pilgrim. As such, thru-hiking may in fact be a form of pilgrimage, at least for the authors of these books.

Thru-hiking and Liminality and Communitas

For Turner and Turner, liminality describes the ritual experience of disorientation between an old identity and new. Liminality encompasses the idea of communitas, which is a state of common experience between many participating in a ritual. Both ideas are present in the act of thru-hiking, as hikers go out to “find themselves” or undergo a change.

Turner and Turner discuss the idea of communitas, writing that “The decision to go on pilgrimage takes place within the individual but brings him into fellowship with like-minded souls, both on the way and at the shrine.” They continue, saying, “But pilgrimage is an individual good work, not a social enterprise.”³⁹ Not only does the state of communitas provide a camaraderie between pilgrims, but it allows for individual transformation. Communitas is very clearly present in thru-hiking, as many writers experience a kinship with others on the trail despite undergoing their own deeply personal processes. For example, Lewis-Kraus writes about the Camino, “There’s a real community in that shared suffering.”⁴⁰ Themes like these come up all the time.

These ideas will be examined in later discussions on solitude, and thus will not be elaborated here. It is important, nevertheless, to bring forward the idea, as it is at the basis of widely-accepted ideas of what constitutes pilgrimage in the field of religious studies.

Thru-hiking and Space

The final element of long distance footpaths I will discuss is space. Traditional pilgrimage routes are well-established, having a clearly defined path and destination. Often, religious pilgrimages

³⁹ Turner and Turner, 31.

⁴⁰ Lewis-Kraus, 117.

revolve around a shrine or sacred site. This is also the case with long distance footpaths in that there is generally a single historical route to follow. Geographical landmarks take on a sacred quality, such as the case with Mt. Katahdin at the end of the Appalachian Trail. Points along the trail become a part of the shared narrative of the journey. And while the experiences surrounding the relationship to space vary, there is nevertheless a fixed way in which thru-hikers complete their hikes and a culture that forms around it. Trails take on a reputation for being sites of healing. For example, Cheryl Strayed says, “[The PCT] is a place for self-reflection and transformation,” suggesting that perhaps the trail itself can take on the role of a cult object used for the purpose of spiritual, emotional, or physical healing benefits.⁴¹

Thus, in providing examples of how popular thru-hiking novels conceive of ideas of transformation, community, and space, I hope to have positioned thru-hiking alongside pilgrimage as an equivalent act, so long as the motivation of the thru-hiker is to undergo a change. Furthermore, in showing the “seeker” forms of religiosity present in these books, I also believe that thru-hiking is an example of a prominent modern religious attitude in which one can be “spiritual but not religious.” As this is still a way of negotiating faith or meaning, I see that the definition of pilgrimage must include such acts.

⁴¹ Pacific Crest Trail Association, “WILD Movie and Book”

CHAPTER 2: THRU HIKING AND AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM

Introduction

In this chapter, it is my aim to begin to situate modern pilgrimage books within a broader historical context of American naturalist writing. In doing so, I briefly introduce this literary history and the cultural context of 19th-century America. Next, I examine key themes from the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, two writers famous for founding the American Transcendentalist movement. I do this in an effort to trace the values presented by Emerson and Thoreau in modern works, these values being (1) nature and (2) self-reliance. Within these themes, I unpack more specific themes of reverence of nature, fear of progress, solitude, individualism, and survival. In looking at these themes, I argue that not only do modern thru-hiking books continue a particular American literary tradition, but also a spiritual tradition characteristic to Transcendentalism. Finally, I discuss ways in which these themes are problematized in modern books and other media.

The Literary and Spiritual History of Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism was both a literary and religious movement in American history.⁴² Inspired by European Romanticism, characterized by themes of nature as a refuge, individualism, and escapism, as well as having other idealistic and highly emotive elements, Transcendentalism arose in the early 19th-century. Transcendentalism is considered to be the first American intellectual movement.

⁴² Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Transcendentalists accepted but expanded upon Unitarianian values of reason, claiming that perception and personal experience trumped rational ways of knowing the divine.⁴³

Transcendentalism was also a response to the influence of Calvinism and its negative ideas of human nature, instead viewing human nature more optimistically. Under this view that the divine was within individuals, Transcendentalists viewed nature as playing a large role in nurturing one's potential, prompting a sort of "natural religion" or belief in the power of nature to positively affect or awaken humans' capacity to understand the divine.⁴⁴ A Unitarian minister by the name of Ralph Waldo Emerson is founded the Transcendentalist movement with his 1836 essay *Nature*, in which he outlines the beauty in nature and suggests that true solitude is the only way for man to attain wholeness.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, society, for Emerson, is a considered to be a distraction. These are ideas that continued to characterize the Transcendentalist movement through the 1830s with notable writers such as Henry David Thoreau, George Ripley, and Margaret Fuller.

By the late 19th century, values of nature promoted by Transcendentalists grew into what is loosely considered as the American environmental conservation movement with the contributions of activist and writer John Muir. It was also during this time that the American National Park system began to take shape, setting precedence for a national value in wilderness that continues today. Writers like Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, and Annie Dillard continued in the vein of this writing style throughout the 20th century, further defining the literary genre and expressing the value and beauty in nature through their work. Transcendentalist writing and thought evolved into environmentalism, among other movements, creating a tradition around reverencing nature.

⁴³ Russell Goodman, "Transcendentalism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendentalism/> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

⁴⁴ Bron Raymond Taylor, "Transcendentalism." In *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*. (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005).

⁴⁵ Emerson, *Nature*, Chapter I.

The religious legacy of Transcendentalism has a life of its own. According to Lawrence Buell, “Transcendentalism is fundamentally an intuitionism, a belief that Truth can be intuitively perceived by higher Reason that this intuition precedes and invigorates all religious awareness, and that it can penetrate the various forms of world religions, extracting from them their essence.”⁴⁶ Taking great interest in Eastern traditions, Transcendentalists played an active role in critiquing Unitarianism (which was already a liberal form of Christianity at the time).⁴⁷ Transcendentalists’ turn away from organized religion, doctrine, and tradition instead promoted individual experiences of religion. It is likely that current religious trends in America—the “spiritual but not religious” attitude adopted by more and more people each year—take root, at least in part, in Transcendentalism.⁴⁸

Much of the modern literature on thru-hiking draws upon this well-established tradition of American naturalist writing, in addition to the spiritual legacy. Themes of nature as truth, solitude, religion, individualism, and society continue to be negotiated through these works, alerting us to continuity between old and new discussions about the individual’s place in nature and society.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in 1803 to a Boston minister. For a short time following studies at the Harvard Divinity School, Emerson became a preacher at the Old Second Church, but resigned in 1831 following the death of his wife. After a trip to Europe, Emerson later returned to New England and made a career of lecturing and writing on his philosophy, which would become Transcendentalism. His most important work, the 1836 essay *Nature*, marks the beginning of this movement. He continued lecturing and writing, forming the Transcendental Club, starting a

⁴⁶ Versluis, 12.

⁴⁷ Versluis, 12.

⁴⁸ Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*. (Oxford University Press, 2001).

magazine called *The Dial* and publishing another seminal Transcendentalist work, *Self-Reliance*, in 1841.

Emerson was influential for other major Transcendentalist figures such as Margaret Fuller, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau; he was particularly supportive of Thoreau, even allowing him to borrow land for his experiment at Walden. Yet Emerson criticized the work of Thoreau, who was very active politically, particularly in their later years as Emerson became more conservative.

It is in *Nature* that Emerson begins to speak of God as being knowable through nature and the self. He examines humans' relationships to nature in eight chapters titled Nature, Commodity, Beauty, Language, Discipline, Idealism, Spirit, and Prospects. For Emerson, nature is the place where one can encounter God, or Spirit. Solitude and self-reflection are critical to this process. It is then through himself that one accesses the universal. In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson goes into detail on his ideas of the self. The largest message is for humankind to follow their own internal guidance and resist the influence of others. He urges his readers to trust themselves and express themselves honestly. Through this process, one accesses a universal kind of knowing which in turn reflects back outwards to society.

Henry David Thoreau

Born in 1817, Henry David Thoreau is perhaps the most prominent of Emerson's mentees and took to applying his ideas. Thoreau was a native of Concord, Massachusetts, the epicenter of Transcendentalism. He attended Harvard College, where he was first introduced to the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. He was a high school teacher and factory worker following his time in school, as well as a budding writer. By this time, he knew Emerson, who encouraged Thoreau to

write. Later, in 1838, Thoreau started a private boarding school, which focused on experiential learning. The school only ran for three years, after which Thoreau began writing on Transcendentalism more frequently, even joining the Emerson household for a short time. Thoreau became quite successful as a writer in the following years, publishing essays in national magazines.

While Emerson offered the abstract philosophies of Transcendentalism, Thoreau often found ways to put them into action, for example through political action or concrete lifestyle changes. Thoreau's famous experiment at Walden was one such example of this, as Thoreau took ideas around the reverence of nature and solitude and with them decided to live alone in a small and remote cabin in the woods. In 1845, Thoreau moved to Emerson's property on Walden Pond, where he built a cabin and committed himself to writing. He spent over two years there, though he spent several more years crafting the manuscript that was published in 1854 as *Walden*. *Walden* was an account of Thoreau's application of Transcendentalist ideas as well as a reflection on simplicity, society, and nature. Prior to leaving Walden Pond, Thoreau took a trip to Maine, upon which he wrote an account of the experience titled *The Maine Woods*.

After his time at Walden Pond, Thoreau became heavily involved in the anti-slavery movement. In 1849, Thoreau published an essay titled *Resistance to Civil Government* in which he argued for the imperfection of man-made governments and justified breaking unjust laws. He continued writing and lecturing until his death in 1862. His essay known as *Walking* was published shortly after his death in 1862. *Walking* describes Thoreau's reflections on wilderness, patriotism and the act of walking.

Nature

Nature as Restorative

Perhaps the largest and most well-known theme of Transcendentalism is in the value of nature, particularly in its role as a restoration of the self. As Transcendentalists see it, nature is the place in which humans can reconvene with the divine and heal from the ills of a damaged society. As I will discuss, these themes are represented in Transcendentalists works and then again in modern thru-hiking books, marking continuity in the way nature is perceived.

Nature as Restorative in Transcendentalism

In the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, nature plays an extremely important role; it is where one finds God, confronts their truth, and seeks refuge from the disappointments of civilization. I will focus on the latter of these points, exploring the ways in which the restorative properties of nature are discussed.⁴⁹

To begin, it is worthwhile to get a sense of how Emerson describes the power of nature. He offers a rich picture of nature, attributing it to having deep healing effects, in addition to causing one to confront his or her own true self. He writes,

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, — no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, — master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ For a contemporary discussion on humans' relationship to nature, see: Marc Bekoff, *Rewilding Our Hearts: Building Pathways of Compassion and Coexistence* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2014).

⁵⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1849), Chapter I.

Emerson's view is vivid in conveying the overwhelming transformative effects one can experience in nature. For him, nature is the ultimate healer, able to take away any disturbances that one might carry (any "disgrace" or "calamity"). It is a place of peace, beauty, the divine, and a loss of ego. Furthermore, he subtly attributes society and others as a distraction from its greatness.

The ideal of nature begins with an understanding of society as being sick or somehow toxic to the human spirit. As such, a place of retreat is necessary. This is precisely the role of nature. As Thoreau writes in a journal entry,

I love Nature partly because she is not man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her. There a different kind of right prevails. In her midst I can be glad with an entire gladness. If this world were all man, I could not stretch myself, I should lose all hope. He is constraint, she is freedom to me. He makes me wish for another world. She makes me content with this.⁵¹

Here, Thoreau reaffirms the importance of nature as a place necessary for restoration, rightness, and joy. He also points to a dissatisfaction of civilization, calling it a restriction on his freedom and a source of lost hope. Thoreau places nature and society in opposition to one another, one as health and the other as illness. In this distinction, he highlights a common Transcendentalist motif of nature as an ideal. To use this kind of medical terminology is appropriate, I think, as Emerson himself does so, writing, "To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone."⁵² This reaffirms the belief of nature as a site of restoration, balance, and health.

⁵¹ Henry David Thoreau and Bruce Rogers, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Walden ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), entry 3 January 1853.

⁵² Emerson, *Nature*, Chapter III.

As I have shown, Transcendentalist conceptions of nature are positive, associating it with healing and restoration from a destructive society. Though the implications of this view are much larger than I can address, they serve as a solid foundation for considering modern thru-hiking books and the ways this view is preserved in new literature.

Nature as Restorative in Modern Books

The premise of many modern thru-hiking books, and perhaps what defines the act as having some religious element, is the emphasis on healing and transformation. The role of nature in this is paramount; and like Transcendentalist writers, modern writers attribute similar powers to nature in restoring balance within an individual. However, unlike Transcendentalists, modern thru-hikers also have a more sympathetic view towards society, expressing positive feelings towards it as well.

In one scene in *Wild*, for example, Cheryl Strayed has a special moment in nature reminiscent to that which Emerson wrote in *Nature*. She writes,

But walking along a path I carved myself--one I hoped was the PCT--was the opposite of using heroin. The trigger I'd pulled in stepping into the snow made me more alive to my senses than ever. Uncertain as I was as I pushed forward, I felt right in my pushing, as if the effort itself meant something. That perhaps being amidst the undeseccated beauty of the wilderness meant I too could be undeseccated, regardless of what I'd lost or what had been taken from me, regardless of the regrettable things I'd done to others or myself or the regrettable things that had been done to me. Of all the things I'd been skeptical about, I didn't feel skeptical about this: the wilderness had a clarity that included me.⁵³

In this experience, Strayed is redeemed by nature, feeling at peace about herself amidst its beauty. She claims to be a part of it, and unlike her past with heroin, her current experience feels healthy. Like Emerson, she attributes nature to healing her of her calamity and disgraces.

⁵³ Strayed, 143.

In modern thru-hiking books, however, a more nuanced relationship with nature and society comes forward. Having an extremely immersive experience in nature, thru-hikers sometimes view society as a relief instead, flipping Transcendentalist ideas around. In *A Walk in the Woods*, Bill Bryson writes “Whatever restorative effects a town visit offered always vanished with astounding swiftness on the trail.”⁵⁴ Throughout the book, he describes town quite positively, viewing it as a cheerful break from the monotony, depravity, and hardship of the trail. Thus, modern views of nature appear much more sympathetic towards what society offers, rather than rejecting it outright.

So, while modern thru-hiking books show nature as an all-powerful healer, they also are more reluctant to label society as toxic in the meantime. What comes forward instead is a more complicated picture of both nature and society, showing them each as holding the potential for goodness, depending on the needs of the individual.

Fear of Development

A fear of development and overall opinion of society as sick underlies much of the Transcendentalist ideas surrounding nature. In the celebration and reverence of nature, an anxiety is generated over that which is opposed to it, that is, human society. I will first provide examples of Transcendentalist writings which communicate anxiety around society. Then, I will trace this idea in modern thru-hiking books, highlighting common ideas of society’s relationship to nature. In modern thru-hiking books, the same values are demonstrated. In addition to expressing fear around human progress, however, there is an additional element of promoting conservation. Recent travel and nature memoirs, I believe, are one of the ways in which Transcendentalist fears of society have manifested into an act of environmentalism. Lastly, I will discuss the act of thru-hiking as an

⁵⁴ Bryson, 68.

expression of reverence for nature, despite the environmental impacts of many trails. It is my hope to trace feelings of unease around society in historical and modern works and later examine the act of thru-hiking itself as it relates to these feelings.

Fear of Development in Transcendentalism

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau's fear of development can be examined as anxiety around humankind's estrangement from nature and the actions of humans on the environment. A concern about humans' separation from nature can be seen, for example, in Emerson's *Nature*. He describes a "discord" between humans and their environment, writing:

We are as much strangers in nature, as we are aliens from God. We do not understand the notes of birds. The fox and the deer run away from us; the bear and tiger rend us. We do not know the uses of more than a few plants, as corn and the apple, the potato and the vine. Is not the landscape, every glimpse of which hath a grandeur, a face of him? Yet this may show us what discord is between man and nature, for you cannot freely admire a noble landscape, if laborers are digging in the field hard by.⁵⁵

Emerson makes clear that nature is a reflection of humans. In being disconnected from nature, we are also somehow disconnected from ourselves. Thus, relationship to the wilderness is critical in a spiritual sense. In his final line, when commenting on laborers digging in the field, Emerson suggests a discomfort around the use, disturbance, and alteration of nature.

Henry David Thoreau makes more explicit the dangers of a disconnection between humans and nature. He extends this anxiety into an expression of weariness towards the actions of humans towards their environment, writing:

Nowadays almost all man's improvements, so called, as the building of houses and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Emerson, *Nature*, Chapter VII.

⁵⁶ Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1022/1022-h/1022-h.htm> (Accessed March 28, 2015).

There is little hope in Thoreau's tone, as he disapproves of the treatment of nature in the name of progress. In using the words "tame" and "cheap," one can conclude that nature, untampered with, is meant instead to be wild and rich. He is skeptical of human development, not believing it to be necessarily positive.

While it is unclear what the ideal Transcendentalist vision of society is, a general theme of uncertainty holds over how it might encroach upon the ideal of nature—wild, free, and untouched. The anxiety around this relationship is twofold, revolving partly around a disapproval of humankind's disconnection from nature and a mistrust of the actions of humans towards the environment. While society's disturbances to the earth appear minor for Transcendentalists—digging in fields or building houses—it is important to also realize that in the mid-19th century fewer threats to the environment existed. Thus in examining future works, it is important to account for these differences.

Fear of Development in Modern Thru-hiking Books

Similar ideas arise in modern thru-hiking books, perhaps even more concretely than in early American literature. These books also offer explicit critiques on society's treatment of nature, marking their partnership with the goals of environmentalist movements. Like Emerson and Thoreau, modern writers often express disapproval around society's encroachment on the natural environment. The feeling of estrangement from nature, however, appears to be much more implicit.

A Walk in the Woods is the most notable example of a work with overt criticisms of the treatment of nature, as it makes mention of environmental issues consistently throughout the book. Bryson discusses environmental issues of acid rain and tree health, for example, vanishing mussels, and logging, to name a few. He sprinkles comments throughout his narrative like "There were twice

as many songbirds in the United States in 1948 as now,” or upon talking about the majesty of the loon, writing “Oh, and by the way, the loons are disappearing everywhere because their lakes are dying from acid rain.”⁵⁷ He criticizes the park service, writing that if given more funds, “nearly all of it would go into building more parking lots and RV hookups, not into saving trees and certainly not into restoring the precious, lovely grassy balds. It is actually Park Service policy to let the balds vanish.”⁵⁸ It is clear that Bryson’s writing calls for an awareness of human impacts on nature and suggests a sense of responsibility over public lands. He brings awareness to explicit issues, offering clear and often times jarring examples of the failures of humanity in protecting the wilderness. Bryson’s criticisms do not reference the idea of progress or development as a culprit directly, but rather, imply it in the juxtaposition of modern and scientific facts.

In *Wild*, Cheryl Strayed also makes a comment related to the environment, although this is hardly the focus of her narrative. Upon encountering land affected by logging, she writes,

The trees that remained standing on the edge of the clear-cut seemed to mourn, their rough hides newly exposed, their jagged limbs reaching out at absurd angles. I’ve never seen anything like it in the woods. It was as if someone came along with a giant wrecking ball and let it swing...

...I was hiking through national forest land, which, in spite of its promising name, meant that I was on land that the powers that be could use as they saw fit for the public good. Sometimes that meant that the land would remain untouched, as it had been on most of the PCT. Other times it meant, that ancient trees were chopped down to make things like chairs and toilet paper.⁵⁹

Wild makes few statements of this kind compared to *A Walk in the Woods*, as Strayed focuses largely on her personal journey. Yet this passage echoes messages of the genre and thinkers that came before her, expressing a sense of concern for way nature is being used by humans. The message

⁵⁷ Bryson, 123, 138, 92, 47, 111, 263.

⁵⁸ Bryson, 94.

⁵⁹ Strayed, 209.

makes its way in, despite the unrelated drama of her account. Like Bryson, Strayed's comment takes on an almost political motive, though both writers only show that there is a problem.

In the thru-hiking blogosphere, the act of thru-hiking is often bridged with environmental motivation. Not only are environmental issues brought to the foreground, but solutions are proposed. A much more positive and proactive stance is taken. One couple writes,

Even in cities, our lives are intertwined with the environment and creatures around us. With this blog, we hope to raise awareness of environmental issues and inspire others to protect our planet for future generations.⁶⁰

They include entries on Leave No Trace principles, urging hikers to be responsible in their lifestyles on and off the trail. "We encourage you to minimize your impact on our planet in everything you do," they write. "Through actions like recycling, buying local organic produce, walking or biking instead of driving, and refraining from watering your lawn, you can help preserve the limited resources we all share." The couple further incorporates messages like this within the content of their blog, recalling "depressing" scenes along their hike, for example:

It was shocking for us to walk through dense forest one moment and into an almost clear cut section the next. Seeing destroyed forest was incredibly depressing, and North Star started to tear up. In addition to the cut trees, almost all the vegetation had been ripped up by heavy machinery. It would take hundreds of years for the forest to fully reestablish itself. The land was devastated.⁶¹

They continue by offering ways in which one can protect the land; by buying used furniture, eliminating paper waste, and donating to conservation organizations, for example. Their environmentalism takes on a more tangible approach than other writers, but nevertheless the

⁶⁰ Wandering the Wild, "About Us," <http://wanderingthewild.com/about-us/> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

⁶¹ Wandering the Wild, "Day 98-101: The Land of Many Uses," <http://wanderingthewild.com/2012/07/30/day-98-101-the-land-of-many-uses/> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

sentiment remains the same. Backpackers are expressing concern over the condition of lands in the U.S., an issue which is a side-effect of society.

A fear of development, as I have shown, is present in Transcendentalist and modern works alike. However, the message has become less abstract, evolving from a concern to a reality. Though the format of the message has changed, the general tone remains. Anxiety around the balance between nature and society is clear, though modern writers at times offer more concrete criticisms.

Fear of Development and the Act of Thru-hiking

According to one study, the biggest consequence of hiking the AT is gaining values in environmental awareness.⁶² While there are clear questions as to whether those who seek out hiking the AT are also already inclined to be environmentally aware, it remains an important question to examine how recreational activities affect the environment. As I have established, thru-hikers tend to share a value for nature that echoes Transcendentalist themes. However, the impact of recreational hikers has been shown in scientific studies to have adverse effects on the environment. Trail vegetation varies with use, for example, and recreational activity in parks is known to lead to erosion and litter.⁶³ This begs the question—do the effects of environmental awareness gained by trail users make a bigger difference on the environment than the consequences of overuse? While this question is beyond the scope of this project, it is my aim to at least suggest that pursuits that refine one's values might be advantageous despite negative consequences that arise in the meantime.

⁶² Eddie Hill, Marni Goldenberg, and Barbara Freidt, "Benefits of Hiking: A Means-End Approach on the Appalachian Trail," *Journal of Unconventional Parks, Tourism & Recreation Research* 2.1 (2009): 19-27. <http://works.bepress.com/mgoldenb/5>

⁶³ N. Lynn, "Effects Of Recreational Use Impacts On Hiking Experiences In Natural Areas," *Landscape and Urban Planning*: 77-87.
A. Törn, A. Tolvanen, Y. Norokorpi, R. Tervo, and P. Siikamäki, "Comparing the Impacts of Hiking, Skiing and Horse Riding on Trail and Vegetation in Different Types of Forest," *Journal of Environmental Management*, 2009, 1427-434.

Self-Reliance

In addition to being the title of one of Ralph Waldo Emerson's most famous essays, self-reliance is a broad theme of the Transcendentalist movement. It encompasses several other themes such as (1) solitude, (2) individualism, and (3) survival, which I will explore individually. Within each of these smaller themes, I first will outline how they are conceived by Emerson and Thoreau. Secondly, I will explore how they are approached in modern works, highlighting continuity in the spiritual and literary tradition. Lastly, I will explore the motivations and receptions of modern works as they relate to these themes, in addition to any other noteworthy points.

Solitude

Solitude and Transcendentalism

One major theme and value of Transcendentalism is solitude. In the act of being alone, one is able to connect to his or her own truth. In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson describes this relationship between authenticity and solitude:

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.⁶⁴

Emerson is not equating solitude with aloneness; rather, he considers it as a sort of state of being. It is in this state that one has cognizance of their "duty," or a connection to their sense of self. He does not urge for complete isolation, however; rather, a conscious solitude. He elaborates on this balance between self and other: "To go into solitude," Emerson writes, "a man needs to retire as

⁶⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance," In *Essays*. (New York: Charles E. Merrill, 1907).

much from his chamber as from society.”⁶⁵ Thus, the act of solitude is spiritual pursuit, a perspective that persists beyond one’s aloneness. Emerson alludes to a fine line between connection to others and connection to self.

Henry David Thoreau writes extensively of his own solitude, affirming its value. In *Walden*, for example, he writes “To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone.”⁶⁶ He continues, “I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.”⁶⁷ Thus, the value of solitude permeates much of Transcendentalist thought.

Solitude, for Transcendentalists, is not merely an act of aloneness. There is suggestion towards a community of those in solitude or with the understanding it brings. In a different discussion entirely, presented in *Walking*, Henry David Thoreau suggests that one is born into the community of walkers. He presents walking as a disposition; one either has the drive or does not. In thinking of this idea as it relates to Thoreau’s thoughts on solitude, an interesting nuance comes forward. A natural community exists among all who walk, and presumably all who participate in the type of solitude Thoreau promotes. He writes:

We have felt that we almost alone hereabouts practiced this noble art; though, to tell the truth, at least if their own assertions are to be received, most of my townsmen would fain walk sometimes, as I do, but they cannot. No wealth can buy the requisite leisure, freedom, and independence which are the capital in this profession. It comes only by the grace of God. It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker. You must be born into the family of the Walkers. *Ambulator nascitur, non fit*. Some of my townsmen, it is true, can remember and have described to me some walks which they took ten years ago, in which they were so blessed as to lose themselves for half an hour in the woods; but I know very well that they have confined themselves to the highway ever since, whatever pretensions they may make to belong to this select class. No doubt they were elevated for a moment as by the reminiscence of a previous state of existence, when even they were foresters and outlaws.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Emerson, *Nature*, Chapter I.

⁶⁶ Henry David Thoreau and Pauler, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, 132.

⁶⁷ Thoreau and Lauter, 132.

⁶⁸ Thoreau, "Walking."

The Transcendentalist picture of solitude, then, does not exist without some complexity. Solitude is copresent with community. In some instances, such as presented in Thoreau's *Walking*, one's particular community is a feature inherent to them, discovered in their own connection to the divine.

Solitude and Modern Works

This balance—the space in which one is both in touch with their sense of truth while still participating in a larger community—is commonly negotiated in modern works, just as it was by Transcendentalist thinkers. Bill Bryson describes a similar phenomenon in *A Walk in the Woods*. He speaks of being both profoundly connected to himself while being connected to his partner Katz, writing:

Even at busy times, however, the woods are great providers of solitude, and I encountered long periods of perfect aloneness, where I didn't see another soul for hours; many times I would wait for Katz for a long spell and no other hiker would come along. When that happened, I would leave my pack and go back and find him, to see that he was all right, which always pleased him. Sometimes he would be proudly bearing my stick, which I had left by a tree when I had stopped to tie my laces or adjust my pack. We seemed to be looking out for each other. It was very nice. I can put it no other way.

Bryson's experience on the Appalachian Trail is both an act of solitude and community. He continues, describing the trail community as a whole:

... you get to know your fellow hikers at least a little, quite well if you meet them nightly at shelters. You become part of an informal clump, a loose and sympathetic affiliation of people from different age groups and walks of life but all experiencing the same weather, same discomforts, same landscapes, same eccentric impulse to hike to Maine.⁶⁹

Bryson describes an informal community that arises among what is commonly an act of solitude. Furthermore, like Thoreau's "family of Walkers," Bryson describes a shared "eccentric impulse" among thru-hikers. While many of these hikers are inspired by a need for solitude, they are also all

⁶⁹ Bryson, 50.

united by a shared drive to do so. This passage also conveys a sense of “*communitas*,” or a feeling of togetherness and equality among those participating in a common ritual. The connection between solitude and community presents a clear example of copresence in the act of pilgrimage, as the experience is simultaneously individual and shared. Rather, a connection between backpackers exists in spite of their deeply personal experiences.

A similar theme arises in *Wild*. Often after spending some time with folks on the trail, Strayed remarks on the relief in returning to her solitude. “It felt good to be alone. It felt spectacular,” she writes in one of these instances, reaffirming the comfort of her aloneness.⁷⁰ Interestingly, upon meeting a fellow hiker, Strayed notes a sense of relationship to him, writing “...he was my kin.”⁷¹ This statement is reminiscent of Thoreau’s idea of a “family of walkers,” a tribe among which Strayed implicitly identifies. She also expands on her thoughts on solitude in the following passage:

Their leaving made me melancholy, though I also felt something like relief when they disappeared into the dark trees. I hadn’t needed to get anything from my pack; I’d only wanted to be alone. Alone had always felt like an actual place to me, as if it weren’t a state of being, but rather a room where I could retreat to be who I really was. The radical aloneness of the PCT had altered that sense. Alone wasn’t a room anymore, but the whole wide world, and now I was alone in that world, occupying it in a way I never had before.⁷²

Strayed is in a constant negotiation between her connection to the trail community and to herself. Furthermore, she experiences her solitude in a profound way. Like other writers in the genre, including those from the 19th century, Strayed values her aloneness and finds a relief in it. She finds this on the trail and in communing with nature.

⁷⁰ Strayed, 306.

⁷¹ Strayed, 87.

⁷² Strayed, 119

Thus, the theme of solitude is a complicated one. As exemplified by Transcendentalist writers, it is a value that is found in nature, though not contained there. Solitude is a state of being connected to oneself, even if in the presence of community. In modern works, this theme continues to be central. It is perhaps the biggest experience of thru-hiking to be alone and one that is described in modern works extensively.

Solitude and Thru-hike Motivation

Despite the clear, albeit nuanced, desire of many writers to retreat from society, the very act of writing their memoirs hinders their solitude. One journalist describes it perfectly in her discussion of *Wild*:

The paradox of all these accounts of lonely wandering is that they actively solicit the companionship of readers and viewers. Cheryl Strayed needed to be alone in the vast American outdoors, but she also needed to tell us about it. The film adaptation of her book — itself already a classic of wilderness writing and modern feminism — provides another reason to be grateful that she did.⁷³

What is brought forward is the idea that although thru-hiking authors have strong desires for solitude, they also push it away in the act of writing their memoirs. As their popularity rises, the luxury of retreat becomes less possible. As strongly as they turn inward during their thru-hikes and in processing deeply personal experiences, so too they turn outward and reveal it to the world. Thus, the value of solitude comes into a unique conflict with the very practice of going on a thru-hike and then publishing the experience, especially with the responsibilities that might follow. Certain aspects of solitude must be sacrificed in order to live up to the lifestyle that comes with popularity, an irony considering that solitude is a major motivation behind these thru-hiking experiences.

⁷³ A.O. Scott, "Walking With Solitude, and Her Baggage," *New York Times Magazine*.

Individualism

Individualism and Transcendentalism

The idea of individualism is one which often arises from readings of *Self-Reliance*. It is often used to describe an idea in which personal needs trump all others. This idea, however, is commonly oversimplified; as one scholar writes, “Emerson’s ‘self-reliance’ is misinterpreted and misrepresented as laissez-faire.”⁷⁴ In reality, the idea as Emerson put it forward is more nuanced. For him, self-reliance is not only a way of experiencing a deep sense of individuality, but is a way of being social in that it gives one a place in their society. One scholar describes this idea like this: “Rather than rejecting submission in the name of freedom, as we’d expect, his individualism defines freedom as submission to unmodifiable law.”⁷⁵ This quote is to be understood in legal terms, where “law” is synonymous with democratic government and “freedom” with legal freedom. Emersonian self-reliance is complex in that it does not actually assert individualism as an act of defiance against the state, but rather, as creating unity in a society. For Emerson, when one cares for their own personal needs and follows the Truth as they believe it, they will not be led astray to anarchy, but rather, they will discover their place within a broader social system. Thus, individualism as defined in Transcendentalism goes beyond one’s personal freedom, but extends to include benefits to the group through independence.

In Emerson’s *Self-Reliance*, he puts forward the idea that one must resist following the values of society. He writes, “The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.”⁷⁶ His sense of individualism requires that one go against the norm. In doing so, all of society benefits, as a

⁷⁴ Joseph L. Blau, "Emerson's Transcendentalist Individualism as a Social Philosophy." *The Review of Metaphysics* 31, no. 1 (1977): 80-92.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20127018>

⁷⁵ Christopher Newfield. *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 7.

⁷⁶ Emerson, "Self Reliance."

self-reliant person has accessed his or her “genius”—a universal truth that can only be found by connection to oneself. The biggest insights of *Self-Reliance* are about encouraging trust in one’s intuitions despite external expectations. In preserving the self, one goes on to benefit humankind. And while individualism is a complicated topic, it is with this understanding that I will look at modern thru-hiking texts.

Individualism and Modern Works

The embrace of individuality and autonomy is an interesting facet of modern thru-hiking books. Authors depict thru-hikes as acts of defiance against the norms of society, yet at the same time, their accounts paint the act as being a form of bondage in and of itself. Decisions to go on these journeys often reflect hikers as leaving one structure (society) for another (life on the trail), painting a complex picture of individualism.

This is a common theme in *A Sense of Direction*, in which the narrator repeatedly expresses the monotony and routine of his pilgrimage on the Way of St. James. He writes that “The Camino isn’t at all about freedom from restraint, but about freedom via restraint.”⁷⁷ More than once he recalls the comfort that comes with doing the same thing every day, writing, “You just let yourself be ushered forward by the arrows, and by the third or fourth one it already feels great to make zero decisions about where you’re going or when you’ll get there or what you’ll do when you arrive.”⁷⁸ For the author, pilgrimage is not about freedom, but rather about restriction; there are in fact few choices to make about how one completes their journey. There is a starting point, an ending point, and arrows to follow in the meantime. The structure of the act of walking a trail is described by all of my authors, who each express a paradoxical liberation that comes from conforming to life on the

⁷⁷ Lewis-Kraus, 126.

⁷⁸ Lewis-Kraus, 137.

trail. It is actually through repetition, discipline, and depravity that these writers find freedom. There is actually little emphasis on autonomy, despite the perceptions one might have in considering these stories. While the act of leaving on pilgrimage might in and of itself be an act of autonomy, the pilgrim undergoes a new and different form of structure whilst on the trail.

Besides resisting tradition both in terms of life choices (by choosing to go on a thru-hike) and religion (as demonstrated previously), there still exists a need for structure. Pilgrims trade the struggles of their daily lives for a different kind of struggle. Life on the trail does not appear to be any different from modern life but merely a reenactment of it; a stark contrast from what others might glean from it. These books are often called “inspiring” or “brave,” calling forward feelings of awe over the uniqueness of the journey relative to everyday life. However, in their experiences which call fans to break through the monotony of their own lives, hikers undergo an alternative experience which includes conformity to a particular trail culture.

Survival

Survival and Transcendentalism

An extension to the idea of self-reliance, especially as Thoreau interpreted it during his time at Walden Pond, is to be responsible for oneself. Self-reliance as described by Transcendentalists is not equivalent to the term “survival,” but it is often interpreted this way. This spirit of survival is also bound up with a value of minimalism.

Minimalism, the act of living with few possessions, underlies the Transcendentalist value of survival. As Thoreau wrote, “Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of humankind.”⁷⁹ He describes

⁷⁹ Thoreau and Lauter, 47.

that modern comforts and luxuries get in the way of one's spiritual path, deeming them not only unnecessary but harmful.

In the vein of survivalism, Thoreau glorifies a past without modern luxuries, writing:

It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them...for the improvements of ages have had but little influence on the essential laws of man's existence; as our skeletons, probably, are not to be distinguished from those of our ancestors.⁸⁰

Here, Thoreau claims no difference between modern humans and our ancestors, implying that there is something natural about living in a more "primitive" way. In his experience at Walden Pond, he aims to do exactly that. Thoreau outlines the expenses of his new lifestyle, listing the materials needed for his cabin and the costs of food.

Much criticism exists over Thoreau's claims of "solitude" and "self-reliance"—he in fact made frequent visits to Concord while at Walden Pond and had his mother doing his laundry. He never left Concord for very long and had many visitors to his home. Nevertheless, he remains as a prime example of American self-reliance and an ideal of simple living. In the case of modern thru-hiking books, Thoreau's acts of minimalism and survival are continued, however, in a new context entirely.

In the act of thru-hiking, the meaning of the word "survival" takes on a new meaning. As one walks, they are subject to a variety of dangers such as hypothermia, animal attacks, or getting lost. Thoreau's values of minimalism and self-reliance are shared by modern thru-hikers, but in the context of backpacking, they are taken to a new level. Very often, new writers speak of the dangers they may face while thru-hiking. For example, Bill Bryson talks about the threat of bears on the trail,

⁸⁰ Thoreau and Lauter, 45.

writing “Black bears rarely attack, but here’s the thing. Sometimes they do.”⁸¹ Cheryl Strayed expresses the dangers of hitchhiking, which she needs to do at one point, writing, “Horrible things happened to hitchhikers...They were raped and decapitated. Tortured and left for dead.”⁸² In both cases, large threats remain imminent to the narrators, a testament to the nature of life on the trail.

Truth

Another important theme of Transcendentalism is truth, understood as an authentic voice or raw expression of one’s convictions and beliefs. Both Emerson and Thoreau speak multitudes on the importance of communicating one’s truth as they understand it, unashamedly and as a service to the world. The idea of truth is closely bound up with the previously discussed themes of nature and self-reliance, but has an additional element of union with the world beyond self.

First, I will unpack the ways in which Emerson and Thoreau conceive of the theme of truth. Secondly I will look at the theme of truth surrounding Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*. Interestingly, of all the books I explored, Strayed’s was most explicitly connected to this theme. On that note, lastly, I will explore what distinguishes Strayed from other books I looked at and suggest future directions for inquiry.

Truth and Transcendentalism

The theme of truth in Transcendentalism can seem indistinguishable from ideas such as authenticity and self-reliance. However, there is an important distinction between those ideas and what the Transcendentalists call “truth.” Truth has to do with self-expression. Not only is there a value in self-discovery, which underlies many other themes of the movement, but there is an

⁸¹ Bryson, 16.

⁸² Strayed, 47.

additional value of sharing the discovery with society. Importance lies in conveying truth to others, as this provides richness to the world.

This idea can be understood in one of the most famous passages of Thoreau's *Walden*, in which he describes his intention behind embarking on his two-year retreat. He writes,

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world. or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.⁸³

Thoreau is motivated by the pursuit of truth. He aims to discover that which is not obvious in everyday life, even if that may not necessarily be comfortable. However, this endeavor is not only a personal one. As indicated in the final lines, Thoreau very clearly intends to make public that which he finds. Knowing the truth is not enough; it must be communicated. There is a sense of responsibility to share what is found. Later in *Walden*, he elaborates on this idea, writing, "I desire to speak somewhere *without* bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments..." He continues, "...for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression."⁸⁴ Here, he emphasizes the communicative element of what it means to be "true." In addition to finding his truth, Thoreau wants to speak it and give it to humankind. Furthermore, he suggests that speaking one's truth is the best way to communicate and that anything else is simply not as effective.

⁸³ Thoreau *Lauter*, 101.

⁸⁴ Thoreau *Lauter*, 258.

Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke on the matter of truth before *Walden*, setting the groundwork behind this notion of radical self-expression. In *Self-Reliance*, for example, he speaks of the power behind truth, writing, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius.” He continues, “Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense...”⁸⁵ Like Thoreau, Emerson offers reasoning behind why truth is virtuous. Speaking and publishing one’s convictions becomes a worldly affair; that is to say that through self-expression, connections are made to others. It is of benefit to society when one shares their truth.

Thus, the value of self-expression, which Transcendentalist writers often call truth, adds depth to ideas surrounding nature and self-reliance. The notion that one can serve society by conveying that which they have found within themselves—their conviction, passions, ideas, and conceptions of the world—is at the heart of the Transcendentalist movement and a value that permeates modern literature and American values at large.

Truth and *Wild*

Of all the books I examined, none were as aligned to the Transcendentalist value of truth as Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*. While it is characteristic of the thru-hiking genre to offer narratives of transformation and vulnerability, Strayed and *Wild* are especially known for this. I will briefly offer examples of Strayed’s ideas on truth, in addition to the reception of her work as it relates to the theme of truth as understood by Transcendentalist writers.

⁸⁵ Emerson, "Self Reliance."

Strayed has made a career of writing and communicating her truth. In her advice to writers, Strayed says:

Be brave. Write what's true for you. Write what you think. What about what confuses you and compels you. Write about the crazy, hard, and beautiful. Write what scares you. Write what makes you laugh and write what makes you weep. Write what makes you feel ashamed or proud. Writing is risk and revelation. There's no need to show up at the party if you're only going to stand around with your hands in your pockets and stare at the drapes.⁸⁶

Like Thoreau and Emerson, Strayed emphasizes the importance of communicating what you know. In describing her MFA experience, she says, "I learned how to listen to the opinions of others and also to get to those opinions out of my head and trust my own instincts."⁸⁷ Thus, her sense of truth is one that originates in herself. And while perhaps it is not explicit that Strayed views this act as a service to humankind like Emerson and Thoreau, she appears to have that effect.

Strayed's experience as an advice columnist and reception as a writer suggest that she is accessing others through her own sense of self. Her impact on readers is noteworthy; she is received widely as being honest and influential as a writer. For example, one Amazon reviewer comments on *Wild*, calling Cheryl Strayed "brutally honest about her weaknesses as well as her strengths." The reviewer continues, "Her work is of great value because she confronts and reveals parts of herself that others would deny and hide." The reviewer acknowledges that Strayed's truth is everyone's truth, an idea that echoes Emerson. The review concludes as follows;

Few have Strayed's courage to live their own truth and to tell that truth without wavering. She is remarkable as a person and as a writer. If you are willing to travel with a damaged woman who puts herself in harm's way and tells about it with raw honesty, who looks at herself without blinking, and who emerges from her daunting journey with greater insight and wisdom, you want to read *Wild*.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Strayed, "Frequently Asked Questions."

⁸⁷ Strayed, "Frequently Asked Questions."

⁸⁸ Amazon User Gentleheart. "A Journey within a Journey."

http://www.amazon.com/gp/review/R192S7BC7CBH98/ref=cm_cr_pr_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B005IQZB14 (Accessed March 26, 2015).

It is clear that at the very least, Strayed is received as one who speaks her convictions. She demonstrates the value of Transcendentalists' understanding of truth by expressing feelings that are imminent for her audience.

This opinion of Strayed as a vehicle for truth is widespread. Reese Witherspoon, who played Strayed in the film depiction of *Wild*, said "[Strayed is] no-nonsense, cuts through the B.S. and just tells it like it is—the same things that people really responded to with her book," for example.⁸⁹ In another review, Eliza Donahue writes that "Strayed discusses her struggles with fear and self-doubt (and the doubt of others) with refreshing honesty...As impressive as Strayed's story is, the humanity at its core is something that we can all relate."⁹⁰ Thus, the truth that Strayed conveys appears to have a strong impact on her readers. She appears to be demonstrating the power that Emerson and Thoreau ascribed to honesty and self-expression.

In both her own philosophy on writing and in her reception by fans, Strayed aligns with the Transcendentalist notion of truth. In the first component, we can see her intentions behind writing, that is, in conveying that which she knows to be true. In the latter examples, we can see the impact that has had on readers. Together it appears that Strayed is in line with ideas of truth presented by Emerson and Thoreau in that it originates from within and consequently connects to the core of others.

Final Thoughts on Truth

Despite only having one author who very clearly addressed ideas of truth in ways reminiscent of Transcendentalist writers—Cheryl Strayed—I chose to discuss the theme anyway as

⁸⁹ Nancy Mills, "Women Gone Wild," (*The Costco Connection*). 27.

⁹⁰ Eliza Donahue, "Review: 'Wild' Provides Insight on the Growth of Self," http://www.santafenewmexican.com/life/teen/review-wild-provides-insight-on-the-growth-of-self/article_e005dde0-f84d-5275-a578-07dff8e0f412.html (Accessed March 25, 2015).

an interesting point for future focus. Strayed is the only female of my selected authors, a detail that I bring forward because gender very clearly plays a large role in *Wild*. Although it is beyond the scope of my research, I believe there is much to be said on the topic on women in the genre of thru-hiking literature and culture. As it relates to truth, it is my observation that Strayed's narrative takes on a more personal and emotive focus than my other example books. Needless to say, this is an area ripe for further inquiry.

Direct References to Transcendentalism in Modern Pilgrimage Media

While some themes of modern thru-hiking books serve clearly to unite them to American naturalist writing and intellectual movements of the past, overt connections are often drawn within the books themselves and in their perceptions by the public. Hikers sometimes cite these authors as inspiration, are compared to them by others, or allude to them in their work. I will provide examples of each circumstance with the aim of further situating these books within a broader context.

One Pacific Crest Trail blogger cites Annie Dillard as an influence on her writing⁹¹; another hosts a quote of Ralph Waldo Emerson on her page.⁹² Such is a common theme among books associated with thru-hiking. References are made to early American naturalist writers, drawing upon a shared cultural knowledge. Such allusions evoke a sense of continuity between early American traditions of nature writing and the present.

Perceptions held by the public perpetuate these associations. In one review of Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, the author relates Strayed to American naturalist authors, writing:

⁹¹ Carrot Quinn, "About Me," <http://carrotquinn.com/about/> (Accessed March 25, 2015).

⁹² A Little Wanderlust, "About Me," <http://justalittlesolitude.com/about/> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

If she had lived in another time, Strayed and Thoreau might have been friends. Both ventured into the woods to find a way to live deep, to suck the marrow out of life. Both allowed themselves to get lost in nature, with the hope that, by getting lost, they might be found—that they might discover a richer, more meaningful way to live. Strayed hoped to emerge not as a different person, but as the person she had been in the past—the person she was before she lost her way. Here, she sold herself short. It is clear that, upon finishing the trail at the Oregon-Washington border (change of plans!), Strayed was far stronger than she ever had been before, or, at the very least, that she had learned enough to become far stronger. In this respect, it seems that another one of her predecessors, John Muir, was right: “In every walk with Nature, one receives far more than he seeks.”⁹³

Not only is Strayed united with Thoreau and Muir by writing of her experiences in nature, but as the reviewer makes clear, she is united by her intentions and character as well. Strayed is assumed to share a kinship with figures of the past and what they stood for. She is assumed to be continuing the conversation that started with these early thinkers. Another such association is made in the following testimonial of Gideon Lewis-Kraus’ *A Sense of Direction*:

Kraus is the type of soul that Henry David Thoreau would have enjoyed, a guy who is a savant in what the 19th century transcendentalist poet and philosopher referred to as the “art of walking.” But while Thoreau concerned himself with the natural surroundings of his native Massachusetts, Lewis-Kraus focuses on a mix of family-inflicted mental maladies, existential boredom, and good old-fashioned *shpilkes*.⁹⁴

Again, thru-hikers are seen as modern-day equivalents to American writers like Thoreau and Muir, replacing these images for something new.

I have introduced examples of direct references to America’s literary past through citations of inspiration and public opinions of modern thru-hikers and authors. I will extend this to include direct references made by authors themselves, exploring further the ways in which Transcendentalism and American naturalist writers are being addressed in the present.

⁹³ Emily Wynes, “The Bull in Either Direction: Wild, by Cheryl Strayed,” *Far North*.

⁹⁴ Jason Diamond, “Roads to Somewhere: Gideon Lewis-Kraus’ “A Sense of Direction” Reviewed,” *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*.

***A Walk in the Woods* and Thoreau: An Example of Direct Reference**

I examine here a particular reference to Henry David Thoreau in *A Walk in the Woods* in an attempt to further situate thru-hike books within a larger literary and intellectual history, in addition to showing the use of direct references as a means of both honoring and problematizing conceptions of nature and simplicity within the American naturalist tradition.

In *A Walk in the Woods*, Bill Bryson puts forward a brief yet noteworthy criticism of Henry David Thoreau, writing,

The American woods have been unnerving people for 300 years. The inestimably priggish and tiresome Henry David Thoreau thought nature was splendid, splendid indeed, so long as he could stroll to town for cakes and barley wine, but when he experienced real wilderness, on a visit to Katahdin 1846, he was unnerved to the core. This wasn't the tame world of overgrown orchards and sun-dappled paths that passed for wilderness in suburban Concord, Massachusetts, but a forbidding, oppressive, primeval country...⁹⁵

Bryson points to two particular points of judgment; (1) Thoreau's engagements in town and (2) his fear in the Maine woods. Interestingly, Bryson's account of hiking the Appalachian Trail shows him to be guilty of similar patterns.

First of all, Bryson's allusions to Thoreau's cakes and barley wine is in line with many criticisms of Thoreau; his cabin at Walden Pond was close to Concord, which afforded him the ability to buy supplies and groceries in the city. In his own account of hiking the AT, however, Bryson appears to have a similar relationship with the towns and conveniences he encounters. At multiple moments in *A Walk in the Woods*, Bryson expresses an excitement towards the society from which he has chosen to retreat. For example, upon reaching the Smoky Mountains, Bryson eagerly anticipates the commodities of a potential visitor's center. He writes,

We hastened down the trail to it as we had an inkling that there was a visitor's center there, which meant the possibility of a cafeteria and other gratifying contacts with the developed

⁹⁵ Bryson, 45.

world. At the very least, we speculated excitedly, there would be vending machines and rest rooms, where we could wash and get fresh water, look in a mirror--briefly be groomed and civilized.⁹⁶

He has a similar moment later on upon seeing the city of Waynesboro from the trail. Bryson writes,

...the feature that made us gawk was a town--a real town, the first we had seen in a week--that stood perhaps six or seven miles to the north. From where we stood we could just make out what were clearly the large, brightly lit and colored signs of roadside restaurants and big motels. I don't think I have ever seen anything that looked half so beautiful, a quarter so tantalizing. I would almost swear to you I could smell the aroma of grilling steaks wafting up to us on the evening air. We stared at it for ages, as if it were something we had read about in books but had never expected to see....We had been a week on the trail and were going to town the next day. That was self-evident. We would hike eight miles, get a room, have a shower, phone home, do laundry, eat dinner, buy groceries, watch TV, sleep in a bed, eat breakfast, return to the trail. All this was known and obvious. Everything we did was known and obvious. It was wonderful really.⁹⁷

Both of these passages depict civilization as offering redemption from the deprivation of backpacking. Bryson claims that a town has “restorative effects,” and certainly, he shows this in moments of gratitude and excitement for the towns he encounters.⁹⁸ His staple food of Snickers bars and recurring fantasies of Coke, for example, demonstrate an engagement with the luxuries he denounces for the sake of thru-hiking and an attraction towards the very society he criticizes. Just as Thoreau did not completely renounce the conveniences and comforts of modern life, nor did Bryson.

Bryson subtly teases Thoreau's fearful reaction to “real wilderness” while on his 1846 expedition to Mount Katahdin. Thoreau gave an account of this trip in a work titled *The Maine Woods*. In that work, Thoreau reflects upon this wilderness, writing,

Perhaps I most fully realized that this was primeval, untamed, and forever untameable *Nature*, or whatever else men call it, while coming down this part of the mountain. ...It is

⁹⁶ Bryson, 88.

⁹⁷ Bryson, 126-127.

⁹⁸ Bryson, 68.

difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and dread and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful...It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made for ever and ever, — to be the dwelling of man, we say, — so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific, — not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in, — no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there, — the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites, — to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we.⁹⁹

Thoreau conceives this landscape to be powerful, frightening, and humbling. He continues, describing the scene further;

What is most striking in the Maine wilderness is the continuousness of the forest, with fewer open intervals or glades than you had imagined... It is even more grim and wild than you had anticipated, a damp and intricate wilderness, in the spring everywhere wet and miry. The aspect of the country, indeed, is universally stern and savage, excepting the distant views of the forest from hills, and the lake prospects, which are mild and civilizing in a degree.¹⁰⁰

Thoreau's descriptions of this expedition are vivid, conveying the vastness and savageness of the Maine woods. Interestingly, Mount Katahdin is a landmark at the end of the Appalachian Trail; it is a mountain peak which, upon summit, marks one's completion of the thru-hike. Thoreau was also famous for attempting to climb it in 1846. In fact, the Maine portion of the Appalachian Trail is considered to be the most difficult section, containing what is called the Hundred Mile Wilderness, the most remote stretch of the AT. Despite Bryson's criticism of Thoreau's toughness and attunement to the wilderness, he himself has a profound experience in the Maine woods, one comparable perhaps to Thoreau's.¹⁰¹ He writes of the woods:

⁹⁹ Henry David Thoreau, "The Maine Woods," In *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau in Twenty Volumes*. (Vol. 3. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864).

¹⁰⁰ Thoreau, "The Maine Woods."

¹⁰¹ Bryson, 45.

At the edge of the woods when we alighted there was a sign announcing that this was the start of the Hundred Mile Wilderness, with a long, soberly phrased warning to the effect that what lay beyond was not like other stretches of the trail, and that you shouldn't proceed if you didn't have at least ten days' worth of food and weren't feeling like the people in a Patagonia ad.

It gave the woods a more ominous, brooding feel. They were unquestionably different from woods further south--darker, more shadowy, inclining more black than green....This was a woods for looming bears, dangling snakes, wolves with laser-red eyes, strange noises, sudden terrors--a place of 'standing night', as Thoreau neatly and nervously put it.¹⁰²

In this reference to Thoreau, Bryson seems to validate the ominousness of the Maine woods and the limits of their strength. In the chapters that follow, Bryson loses his hiking partner Katz in Hundred Mile Wilderness, a climax to the book. Like Thoreau, Bryson depicts the danger of the woods, writing that "...once you were lost in these immense woods, you would die. It was as simple as that. No one could save you."¹⁰³ After a night alone, Bryson finds Katz and the two men share a moment of relief:

"To tell you the truth, I've never been so glad to see another person in my whole life, and that includes some naked women."
There was something in his look.
"You want to go home?" I asked.
He thought for a moment. "Yeah. I do."
"Me too."
So we decided to leave the endless trail and stop pretending we were mountain men because we weren't.¹⁰⁴

At that moment, the men ended their thru-hike and began to return home. "So we didn't see Katahdin," writes Bryson.¹⁰⁵ Like Thoreau's experience in 1846, the sheer power of the wilderness proved to be overwhelming.

¹⁰² Bryson, 254.

¹⁰³ Bryson, 261.

¹⁰⁴ Bryson, 266.

¹⁰⁵ Bryson, 268.

As demonstrated in this example of Bryson's reference to Thoreau, it is characteristic of some modern walking literature to allude directly to Transcendentalist writers, further situating these books within a broader historical context of American naturalist writing. Furthermore, upon further exploration, these direct references serve to pay homage to writers of the past while simultaneously drawing out the nuance of ascetic practices in the American wilderness.

In comparing themes of nature and self-reliance between modern thru-hiking books and Transcendentalist writers, I have contextualized modern works within a broader literary and spiritual American tradition. Themes might remain the same, as with the reverence of nature, or they may be taken further by modern writers, such as with survival or fear of development, but nevertheless, modern genres participate in an ongoing cultural dialogue. Thru-hiking as pilgrimage, I believe, can be understood within this tradition.

CHAPTER 3: MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY, AND TRAIL CULTURE

The experience of thru-hiking is hardly contained to the trail. In some cases, the trail experience is removed from the landscape and placed into the public eye, represented through the media such as books, films, and blogs. Often, it is used as a promotional tool for companies as a means of brand endorsement. In other cases, the outside world is brought onto the trail, as is the case when hikers use social media and technology to communicate or enhance their experience. In both instances--whether the trail is brought into the world or the world is brought onto the trail--the experience of thru-hiking is a collective one, creating a dialogue between community insiders and outsiders. In this section, I will look at the ways books, films, and the internet are being used by hikers and non-hikers and the ways in which they engage the idea of the thru-hiking experience. In doing so, I hope to show that media has an influence over the idea of thru-hiking as pilgrimage.

In a study surveying AT hikers mid-hike, it was found that hikers with more backpacking experience were less likely to think about personal responsibilities while on the trail.¹⁰⁶ I find this to be in line with my examinations of these media, as non-hikers typically feel inspired by popular thru-hiking media and are drawn to more narrative-driven accounts. I believe that the prospect of transformation through thru-hiking is attractive to non-hikers, driving the change in the genre towards more personal accounts.

Books

Thru-hiking books situate themselves within the intersection of nature, travel, self-help, and memoir writing. Most often they engage all of these elements, focusing, for example, on the wilderness experience, travel through new landscapes, gear and training, and personal development.

¹⁰⁶ Susan Bratton, *The Spirit of the Appalachian Trail Community, Environment, and Belief on a Long-distance Hiking Path*. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2012) 183.

More recently, they have become stories of “finding oneself” through experience in the wilderness, highlighting personal narratives over factual accounts. They are often consumed by hikers and non-hikers alike. Upon introducing the history of this modern genre, I will discuss the way these books are used and received by hikers and non-hikers in order to later demonstrate the influence of books on the idea of thru-hiking as pilgrimage by contemporary U.S. authors.

Thru-hiking books, like any other form of literature, have not stayed the same throughout history. Until recently, guidebooks were the dominant form of trail literature. They have been available since the 1930s and continue to be published yearly as technical sources, meant to assist with planning and backpacking logistics. These are not books that circulate far beyond the backpacking community. However, the current genre of thru-hiking literature, which has significant readership in non-hikers, focuses on the experience of hiking and more recently, on the personal lives of the authors. This marks a change in the way thru-hikes are represented, giving emphasis to stories of transformation and growth. These books have clear connections to earlier nature books, for example, John Muir’s quintessential *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911). By the late 20th-century, however, books like *Appalachian Hiker: Adventure of a Lifetime* (1971), *The High Adventure of Eric Ryback* (1971), and *Walking with Spring* (1981) became popular, offering more personal accounts of trail experiences and intentions of the hiker. It is not until the early 1990s and 2000s that the genre rises in popularity and begins to look like the more distinctive and popular form of literature we see today. In this new wave of hiking literature, books become more focused on the hiker and less on the trail or sport itself. Some examples of these kinds of books include *On the Beaten Path: An Appalachian Pilgrimage* (2000), and *A Blistered Kind of Love: One Couple's Trial by Trail* (2003), in addition to *Wild* (2013), *A Walk in the Woods* (1998), and *A Sense of Direction: Pilgrimage for the Restless and Hopeful* (2013). These books often showcase the trail as a background to more central stories of love, death,

family, or spirituality. Titles depicting grand trips and stories of “finding oneself” such as *Into the Wild* (1996) and *Eat, Pray Love* (2006) are often compared to thru-hiking books as well, as they are similarly focused on the personal experiences of their protagonists. While thru-hiking books and similar stories are not entirely new, they have undergone a significant change in the past several decades, now including stories that are driven by narratives of healing and change, in addition to ever-present themes of adventure and pioneering.¹⁰⁷ While the books mentioned are all published and widely distributed, it is also worthwhile to mention that some self-published thru-hiking memoirs are circulated around the web as well.

Books about thru-hiking, perhaps not surprisingly, are read by thru-hikers. While the community largely consumes technical guides, it is also common for hikers to read popular trail memoirs and journals as well, all in preparation for their own trips. While some backpackers cite these books as their inspiration to thru-hike, most do not. In fact, among backpackers, perceptions of these books have varying presentations, which include (1) appreciative; (2) neutral; and (3) weary feelings about their impact on the sport. However, no matter the opinion, it is clear that these books do not go unnoticed by thru-hikers.

To showcase some ways thru-hikers are commenting on these popular books, I navigated thru-hiking internet forums and noted general themes in the reception of books such as *Wild*, *A Walk in the Woods*, and others. A majority of comments make recognition that popular books do not capture the “real” thru-hiking experience, though they are still interesting to read as a story. Rather than depicting the depravity, monotony, or boredom often present on thru-hikes, books, particularly

¹⁰⁷ Satirical books of the genre are also coming forward—for example, a *Wild* spoof title *Rabid: The Pacific Crest Trail. 'Cause Therapy Ain't Working*, by Libby Zangle. An Amazon book description reads, “Rabid is a semi-fictional account of the weird and wonderful world that Libby found on the Pacific Crest Trail, a world where time is measured by distance from Mexico, where poop is a casual conversation topic, and where hikers are stalked by the worshipful followers of their trail blogs. Darkly humorous, Rabid tells of the beautiful, high-energy, technology-permeated, sometimes-overcrowded, modern thru-hiking experience.”

popular ones, glamorize the act instead. Additionally, backpackers seem to disagree over whether these books will have positive or negative impacts on trails and the backpacking culture at large.

Within backpacking forums, neutral receptions of popular books dominate. On the value of thru-hiking books to hikers, for example, one user wrote,

I think a lot of people who identify as hikers (or prospective hikers) want something that focuses primarily on the actual experience of long-distance hiking, rather than a story about something else that happens to use a long trail as a backdrop.¹⁰⁸

This comment echoes a common opinion which establishes a separation between “real” hikers and those who simply enjoy popular hiking narratives. There is an understanding that the depth of a thru-hiking experience is not captured in books. Another commenter writes, “...whilst I think [*Walk in the Woods*] was a good book and entertaining, it doesn't represent the trail experience.”¹⁰⁹ There is a sense of division between the hiking community and other readers, yet no tension between the two is noted. Comments like these show a neutrality towards the genre, appreciating them for what they are but not including them as representations of a genuine thru-hiking experience. They are not met with overwhelmingly positive nor negative opinions, but simply place such books into a category of their own.

However, the distinction made between hiking readers and non-hiking readers can be grounds for both acceptance and animosity for “armchair travelers” or readers who have not thru-hiked. Among readers who express distaste for the genre, there is often a fear of non-hikers ruining

¹⁰⁸ User bogus83, "What Makes a "good" Hiking Movie? (or Book) • /r/AppalachianTrail," http://www.reddit.com/r/AppalachianTrail/comments/2ro9dt/what_makes_a_good_hiking_movie_or_book/ (Accessed March 26, 2015).

¹⁰⁹ User Mateza, "What Makes a "good" Hiking Movie?"

the trail experience for “real hikers,” interrupting the culture and the spirit behind the act. One comment is as follows:

...if you want to see the AT and know what the AT is like, then do what I did and go find out for your self. then when others ask you what it's like, tell them the same thing. go find out. the AT is nestled between very densely populated areas in places that have very little 'natural lands' left. I'm wary of any *hiker* whose out there to make a documentary or write a book. the AT and all natural lands in general should be respected, not exploited.¹¹⁰

Here, the user expresses a common fear within the community, claiming that increased attention to the Appalachian Trail will damage the land as well as the personal thru-hiking experience.

However, many voices stand in opposition to this kind of hostility towards non-hikers. In a spirit of embrace for new books, one user writes:

Wild is worth a paid view, in my opinion. Have no interest in seeing it again, but as a backpacker I will take any chance I get to consume media related to backpacking. Especially here considering there should be a pretty big opportunity for dialogue to open up between backpackers and those casually interested after watching the film (or reading the book). This is a good thing(!), and I wish people would stop lamenting every hiking themed movie or piece of entertainment that comes out as if it is some personal slight to them because it doesn't portray THEIR idea of what the outdoors experience should be.¹¹¹

The success of the book and film *Wild* is portrayed as uniting hikers and non-hikers, embracing opportunities for new people to take interest in hiking and the outdoors. The user also allows room for interpretation around what makes a good experience, perhaps in line with HYOH mentality.

Along a similar vein of acceptance of new thru-hiking literature, some backpackers express that non-hikers pose no threat to the authentic trail experience, as a majority are simply not cut out

¹¹⁰ User DICKSUBJUCY, "My Thoughts, Questions, and Rants on AT Documentaries. Feel Free to Share Your Thoughts as Well. • /r/AppalachianTrail," http://www.reddit.com/r/AppalachianTrail/comments/1ul427/my_thoughts_questions_and_rants_on_at (Accessed March 26, 2015).

¹¹¹ User horsefarm, "Opinions on the Movie, Wild? • /r/AppalachianTrail," http://www.reddit.com/r/AppalachianTrail/comments/2qkj98/opinions_on_the_movie_wild/ (Accessed March 26, 2015).

for it. One user says “People don't walk to Canada because they watched a movie,” pointing to the idea that thru-hiking is simply too great of a commitment to be sustained by the inspiration of a book or film.¹¹² In these kinds of commentary, the identity of thru-hikers and the purity of the trail remain intact regardless of the genre’s rise in popularity.

On the other hand, within non-hiking circles, modern thru-hiking and wilderness books provide an entry point into a new experience. Some trail organizations report increases in hiking traffic following the release of major books, and reviews often verify that such books inspire readers to go into the outdoors. One Amazon reviewer comments on a book titled *Hiking Through*, writing,

I'm not an outdoorsy person. I hate camping and I hyperventilate at the thought of aerobic exercise, although I do enjoy walking. I've done, and mostly enjoyed, short hikes here and there over the course of my life, and I walked all over Rome and Florence and Paris, but I cannot fathom hiking 2,220 arduous miles over mountainous terrain. Yet, Paul's account of his experience hiking the Appalachian Trail makes me want to go hiking myself.¹¹³

She expresses an interest in the trail, despite the fact that the story hardly focuses on the details of the physical experience. Thus, it appears that these books, in being approachable and character-driven, attract readers to the act of hiking, despite the fact that hiking is seldom the focus.

Broad audiences, as I have shown, consume modern thru-hiking books. As perhaps the most widely accepted example of thru-hiking media, these books prove to influence the ways in which the hiking and non-hiking worlds connect; their reception is both unifying and dividing, a dichotomy

¹¹² User couchst. "How Do You Think the Movie Wild Will Effect the PCT? Do You like the Attention the PCT Is Getting, or Would You Rather Not Have It? • /r/PacificCrestTrail," http://www.reddit.com/r/PacificCrestTrail/comments/22h02y/how_do_you_think_the_movie_wild_will_effect_the/ (Accessed March 26, 2015).

¹¹³ Amazon User Holly, “Enthralling and captivating. One of the best books I’ve ever read,” <http://www.amazon.com/Hiking-Through-Journey-Freedom-Appalachian-ebook/dp/B0073UNAN4> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

which problematizes what it means to be an authentic trail user and also demonstrates the widespread influences of media broadly.

Films

Thru-hiking, as well as pilgrimage, is often the subject of major films. While books are more plentiful, they are not necessarily more impactful, meaning reaching broader audiences. Trails see increased hiking activity following the release of major books, however, it is small compared to the increased popularity following a film. Thus, movies bring an important experience to those who are not experiencing thru-hiking directly.

Thru-hiking films are perhaps more popular than ever, only having been created in the past decade or so. Most thru-hiking films are adaptations of books and stories, for example, *The Way* (2010), *The Way Back* (2010), *Into the Wild* (2007), *Wild* (2014), and *A Walk in the Woods* (2015). This is not always the case, however, as with films like *Southbounders* (2005) and *Mile Mile and a Half* (2013). They mostly take the form of documentaries or dramas.¹¹⁴ A significant amount of low-budget and personal films and youtube series have also been created around trail experiences. Similar to books, these films blend together themes of nature, sport, and personal development, often featuring extensive landscape and natural visuals.

In considering what films do differently than books, it seems that there is little difference; like hikers' reactions to books, films within this genre are often regarded as an incomplete picture of the thru-hiking experience. One forum user writes,

I have a theory that a hiking movie can either be successful or accurate, but that you must trade one for the other; you can't have both.

¹¹⁴ An exception to this is the 2014 horror film *Beacon Point*, which takes place on the AT.

A thru hike is an epic journey, and I mean that in the literal sense. It takes a ridiculous amount of time to achieve, and that time is densely packed with significant experiences. The best any filmmaker can hope to achieve in 90-150 minutes is a sort of "highlights reel."

Plus, an important part of the overall experience is the weeks of repetition. Get up, walk, eat, sleep, repeat. Maybe add some rain for variety's sake. Get up, walk, eat, sleep. This simplification of one's life can result in a zen like state of enlightenment or even bliss for the hiker. For an audience member, this equals boredom. At best, a filmmaker can rely on a montage, which gets the point across to the viewer, but feels... diminished from a hikers perspective.

I'd love to see a ten or thirteen part miniseries that follows a small group of protagonists, exploring their change over time, interactions with each other and their folks back home, how they each face the trials of hiking differently (or the same!), how they overcome, how they fail.

If the current trend continues and the genre really takes off, maybe we'll get lucky and HBO or Vince Gilligan could take on the trails and give us something that actually looks and feels like what we really do, but for now I don't see it. Perhaps my inability to see this is why I'm not a screenwriter.¹¹⁵

Again, hikers accept how much more there is to thru-hiking than could ever be captured on screen or in a text. Nevertheless, films remain a part of the thru-hiking experience in some regard, as they are consumed by hikers.

What appears to be more well-received among hikers, however, are low-budget films surrounding thru-hikes, as they provide a way to access memories from specific trails. For example, in one stop-motion film of the entire Appalachian trail, most comments came from hikers who remember their own experiences. One writes, "Thanks for the flashbacks!" and another "I enjoyed re-living my 2005 thru hike and was able to name almost all the areas shown."¹¹⁶ In this form, films serve as a way to access a hiker's own memories on the trail, reminding them of their own journey rather than the journey of another.

¹¹⁵ Garmachi, "What Makes a "good" Hiking Movie?"

¹¹⁶ Written by users Beau Falkner and Mark Booth, respectively., "Green Tunnel." <https://vimeo.com/20218520> (Accessed March 26, 2015).

In the armchair crowd of non-hikers who enjoy hiking books, receptions of films are generally inspiring. Furthermore, in the cases of *Wild* or *Into the Wild*, for example, they are seen by many people, often becoming a cultural meme. Here, experiences of walking and the wilderness enter the experience of those who are simply enjoying a well-known or exciting story. The fact that it takes place in the wilderness or on a hike is not as important as the drama.

Even in the cases of low budget and personal kinds of cinematic works, non-hikers express their own desires for thru-hiking. One commenter writes, “Amazing. Would love to do this someday,” while another says “Makes me want to go for a hike.”¹¹⁷ Thus, the impact is similar to books, giving people off the trail a reason to go onto the trail.

As a form of media, thru-hiking films are not as common as books, yet can make greater impacts on their audience. Furthermore, they may also attract broader audiences and more easily enter the common media experience. Regardless, the presentation of the trail into the outside world generates some conversation over the value and joy in hiking and being outdoors.

The Internet

With reasonable internet access on most thru-hiking trails, the internet serves an important function in hosting dialogue between thru-hikers and beyond. Blogs, online journals, forums, and social media all serve the purpose of bringing the trail experience to the web, and as a result, into the world outside the trail.

One popular form of media surrounding thru-hiking is blogging. Usually, blogs are created by thru-hikers about their trail experiences, in real-time, being updated as one completes their trip. Blogs often include personal route information, gear lists, and memorable moments from the trail.

¹¹⁷ Written by users Sam Morrill and RDJim, respectively, "Green Tunnel."

This is an example of the trail experience being projected out to the world, yet, it is unique in that it is seldomly done after the fact. Thus, readers can follow the experience as it unfolds, or view it in its entirety after the thru-hike ends.

Blogs and online journals have become a common tool for trail organizations to communicate trail conditions or up-to-date experiences, allowing them to serve as a marketing and communication tool on behalf of the trail. The PCTA website, for example, provides links to thru-hiker blogs throughout the season, while sites like TrailJournals.com provide a forum for any hiker to submit stories from particular trails or trail segments. Like books, these media can take on a practical function--discussing trail conditions, animal sightings, the weather, or gear requirements. However, they can also take on a more personal function, describing one's trail experience in the context of their emotional journey (in mourning the death of a loved one, following military service, discovering purpose, or losing weight, for example). Often times, they are used to communicate to family members and friends as well. The ease of blogging compared to making a film or book allows for amateurs to document their experiences and potentially access a large readership. It is for this reason that the blogs and other internet resources outnumber other media forms.

Online groups uniting hiker "classes," or hikers who share a thru-hiking season, exist to create a community supplementary to that which is found on the trail. Pages on Reddit or Facebook, for example, serve as popular platforms to host discussions of trail information, but also to arrange for meet-ups and hiking partners. These online communities offer a way for hikers to find each other off the trail as well, something that was not always possible.

Lastly, the use of social media on the trail is rampant as thru-hikers document their experiences for their immediate social group and more. Hashtags like #thruhiking, #PCT, #AT, and #caminodesantiago mark posts on Instagram and Twitter, displaying photos and messages to the

public, often documenting entire journeys. Common photos and tags involve landscapes, gear, permits, food, and relationships established on the trail. Gear companies and trail organizations participate in social media as well, using it as a branding and marketing tool. Social media, as I hope to have shown, offers a dynamic way for thru-hikers to exhibit their experiences and bring attention to their journeys.

The multi-functionality, access, and ease of the web provides an exciting platform under which thru-hikers can communicate their experiences to the world. Meanwhile, folks off-trail can provide support, learn more, become inspired, or live vicariously through those who undertake these hikes. It is from all of these sources that thru-hiking becomes infused into everyday internet use, providing visibility to the sport and connection to the community at large.

The Expectation of Transformation

The expectation of transformation while thru-hiking, due in part to influences of media, can sometimes be greater than any actual transformation that is achieved. Cheryl Strayed describes the hopes she had for the trail prior to hiking. Upon asking herself difficult questions about how she got to where she is, she writes,

These were questions I'd held like stones all through the winter and spring, as I prepared to hike the Pacific Crest Trail. The ones I'd wept over and wailed over, excavated in excruciating detail in my journal. I'd planned to put them all to rest while hiking the PCT. I'd imagined endless meditations upon sunsets or while staring out across pristine mountain lakes. I'd thought I'd weep tears of cathartic sorrow and restorative joy each day of my journey. Instead, I only moaned, and not because my heart ached. It was because my feet did and my back did and so did the still-open wounds all around my hips.¹¹⁸

In her fantasy of the PCT, Strayed imagines her problems being resolved. She imagines a “cathartic” experience upon which she might attain a sense of inner peace. She does to some degree find this at

¹¹⁸ Strayed, 85.

the end of her journey—this much is true. However, while hiking, she does not feel herself healing or finding the peace she is looking for; only physical hardship. In one documentary, a man says “I don’t feel that I’m learning that much new about myself” while hiking the AT, echoing a similar disappointment in the effects of his journey.¹¹⁹ So while hopes may be high by thru-hikers that a transformation will occur within them, they may find themselves disappointed, at least in the midst of the undertaking. The experience of transformation is often realized after the fact, as was the case with Strayed and Lewis-Kraus.

Sponsorship

An interesting phenomenon of thru-hiking is sponsorship. This occurs in two ways; when a company or brand supports a thru-hiker in exchange for publicity, or when a thru-hiker hikes to raise money for a charitable cause. In both cases, the thru-hike is used to elicit a response from their audience, prompting financial support towards a cause or to a brand.

The idea of sponsorship by a company is attractive to both the thru-hiker and the brand they represent. Through social media and connections on the trail, the sponsored thru-hiker endorses a product to the public, increasing the awareness of that brand. In exchange, companies provide thru-hikers with discounted gear, free gear, food, and in some cases, a stipend. This relationship brings the outer world onto the trail through product samples and brings the trail into the outer world through the use of social media.

Secondly, sponsorship can take the form of charity. In this case, a thru-hiker completes their journey, typically recording it in some public way. In doing so, they support a cause or charity and accept donations for that cause for every mile walked. This has been done for disease, human rights,

¹¹⁹ "Beauty Beneath the Dirt - Official Trailer," <https://youtu.be/ccIeM1Y4RoU> (Accessed March 28, 2015).

and veteran organizations, bringing awareness and money to them. It also occurs that hikers simply ask for donations to support their hike directly, using blog traffic as an opportunity to gain financial support. Nevertheless, thru-hiking can be leveraged into an act of activism or as an opportunity to draw attention to other causes.

Sponsorship as it relates to thru-hiking can serve as an endorsement of a product, brand, social cause, or personal journey. Regardless of the motivation, however, it serves as a strong example of the conversation between thru-hikers and non-hikers.

Technology

The use of technology on the trail is a topic that goes widely discussed in the thru-hiking community. While technology can enhance the experience, allowing hikers to communicate beyond the trail or stay in touch with society, others fear that it is a detriment. Gear is a crucial part of trail culture, however, technology that goes too far beyond backpacking essentials is often met with uncertainty, despite the fact that they are embraced by some.

Backpackers are notoriously obsessed with their gear, particularly with having the most functionality for the lowest weight. High-tech devices designed for backpackers are all over the market; products like the Handspresso Wild Hybrid, a portable outdoor coffee machine, digital recording binoculars, radios, and portable grills, for example. While it is an essential part of trail culture, too much technology is also a major point of criticism.

Disdain over the use of technology on the trail is widespread. In one article, the author writes on the use of phones on the trail. He expresses weariness towards too much connection, writing,

...although I am a *huge* proponent of the “hike your own hike” mentality, I strongly encourage aspiring thru-hikers to use their electronic devices as sparingly as possible *while still preserving your sanity*. Make an effort to go long periods without the crutch of your iFriend. Chances are, your AT thru-hike will be the *only* opportunity you’ll have to get away from our hyper-plugged in society. Take advantage of that. Make a point to connect with your fellow hikers and your surroundings. It’s a far more rewarding experience.¹²⁰

He uses language suggesting that the trail is an escape from society and that technology diminishes the rewards of thru-hiking. This is a common theme in modern book as well. For example, Bill Bryson writes in *A Walk in the Woods*,

I hate all this technology on the trail. Some AT hikers, I had read, now carry laptop computers and modems, so that they can file daily reports to their family and friends. And now increasingly you find people with electronic gizmos like the Enviro Monitor or wearing sensors attached by wires to their pulse points so that they look as if they've come to the trail straight from some sleep clinic.¹²¹

Bryson observes what he considers to be too much technology on the trail. Another writer, Gideon Lewis-Kraus of *A Sense of Direction* takes a similar notice about internet access, writing, “[the pilgrim welcome center] has free internet, so we stop to check our email, which we hadn't had the chance to check in at least sixteen hours.”¹²² Clearly, the opportunity to go online is plentiful for Lewis-Kraus; this turns out to be a repeated theme in his book. These examples show some ways technology is being mentioned and criticized within the thru-hiking community, regardless of the fact that it is used by everyone to some extent.

Despite the ability of technology to enable communication beyond the trail, too much is met with disdain. In their escape from society, many thru-hikers loathe too much connection and too much luxury, considering it harmful to the authenticity of the experience. Despite the popularity of

¹²⁰ Appalachian Trials, “[Mailbag] How Do I Keep My iPhone Charged on the Appalachian Trail <http://appalachiantrials.com/mailbag-how-do-i-keep-my-iphone-charged-on-the-appalachian-trail/>” (Accessed March 26, 2015)

¹²¹ Bryson, 213.

¹²² Lewis-Kraus, 95.

gear and gear-talk on the trail, there is a line beyond which some consider inauthentic or diminishing of a meaningful experience.

Thus, the power of media, whether in the form of books, films, or the internet, have impacts over the ways hikers and non-hikers are relating to trails and to the sport at large. While non-hikers often feel inspired by these media to go out into the woods—a potentially positive thing for the environment—hikers at times express discomfort around the idealization of their sport and the potential for the experience to be threatened by too much attention from the public. Nevertheless, discussions around thru-hiking provide some access into considering the experience, in addition to how that experience may be changing with media influence.

CONCLUSION

Based on narratives of popular media accounts, I have begun to demonstrate thru-hiking as an act of modern pilgrimage based on its transformative, community, and spatial elements.

In chapter 1, I provided examples of transformation, community, and relationship to space from three popular thru-hiking novels. Whether considering Gideon Lewis-Kraus' forgiveness towards his father or Cheryl Strayed's recovery from a period of drug-use, extramarital sex, and depression, these books are very clearly narratives of redemption and change, one of the qualities that defines pilgrimage. Next, these books make mention of the community found on the trail or the unique relationship shared between hikers. Finally, in following these historical trails, with their own history and culture, these authors connected to space in a way characteristic of pilgrimage in which objects or sites are believed to provide spiritual, emotional, or physical benefit. Through these three elements, my selected books showed thru-hiking to be an act that is largely indistinguishable from traditional conceptions of pilgrimage.

In chapter 2, I showed that thru-hiking literature is both like and unlike earlier forms of American nature writing. With regard to the theme of nature as access to the self and solitude, I found that modern books are very similar to Transcendentalist ideas. With the theme of fear of development, I highlighted a greater and more concrete urgency in modern works towards preserving the environment, yet also a greater sympathy towards society. With the theme of individualism, I brought forward the paradoxical reception of modern books as acts of freedom while also showing the restraint and structure inherent to the trail experience. With the theme of survival, I have shown that modern novels take the idea further than Transcendentalists, exercising ideas of self-reliance to new levels. Finally, with the theme of truth, I suggested that the notion of

accessing the self in service of society is present in modern and past works alike, marking continuity between them.

In chapter 3, I showed that the understanding of thru-hiking as modern pilgrimage is impacted by media like books, films, and the internet. In examining differences between the reception to different media forms by hikers and non-hikers, it appears that media provides inspiration to non-hikers and mixed reactions among hikers, some of whom feel that popularity to thru-hiking will threaten the authentic experience. I also provided examples of how technology and social media are being used on the trail, which fundamentally changes the thru-hiking experience.

Thus, it is my conclusion that thru-hiking can be characterized as a form of pilgrimage. While might be easier to categorize it as “secular pilgrimage,” I maintain that more individualistic forms of religiosity merit recognition as religious practice. Of course, three popular accounts do not necessarily represent the entire phenomenon of thru-hiking, so I also maintain, like others, that motivations behind the act by the pilgrim are essential in making a thru-hike become a pilgrimage.

This work provides an example of the role of media studies in the academic study of religion. As a dominant force, media provides a timely and broad perspective on the dynamics between religion and society, allowing us to examine discourse surrounding particular actions such as pilgrimage or thru-hiking. In the context of this work, media helps in not only looking at the act of thru-hiking itself, but the ways in which this act is received and understood by outsiders to the sport. I believe this to be an area rich for future work, as the intersections between media and religion are fruitful in providing new perspectives on old ideas.

The contributions to religion and society are such that thru-hiking has the potential to (1) impact the environment and humans’ relationships to it, (2) provide deeply transformative experiences to those outside of organized religious traditions, and (3) generate popular narratives

that form collective identities around values of wilderness, solitude, survival, individualism, and truth. In shaping ideas around the value of nature as an agent for personal growth, popular thru-hiking media offers potential for tangible changes to how Americans treat their natural environment. Also, it brings forward opportunities for understanding extreme practices such as long-distance walking as a form of healing devoid of an explicitly religious context. This is also interesting in that it demonstrates the way religiosity can be redefined and represented in new social contexts. Lastly, it points to the influence of media in directing and reflecting these values.

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